

INFERNO!

TALES OF FANTASY & ADVENTURE

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Issue 3

INFERNO!

WHAT CAN I SAY? Issue 3 of *Inferno!* is upon us already, with issue 1 sold out and scant few of issue 2 to be found. What's more, *Inferno!* issues 4, 5 and even 6 are already well under way, and all that remains for number 3 is this editorial page – that dogged task which returns to badger me every two months.

Actually, at the risk of upsetting all our incredible artists and writers, I firmly believe that the editorial bit is the hardest part of *Inferno!* to finish. Of course, it takes a great deal of hard work from the thousands of Black Library minions to cram everything into an issue, but then I'm expected to say something meaningful about *Inferno!* 3 in just one page. Impossible!

So, what's in store for the intrepid reader in this thrill-packed issue? Why, more incredible action and adventure stories from the worlds of Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000, of course – what else?

At *Inferno!*, we are always trying to push the boat out a little further: try new art styles, new writers, new features, and so on. Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000 are big worlds to explore, so there is always something different to have a look at. In this issue, for example, we have our first computer-generated comic strip, featuring the enigmatic Eldar; the first Warhammer 40,000 tank cutaway (and what a cracker it is too); excellent illustrations from three new artists; and a storming debut Warhammer story from ace author Dan Abnett. All wrapped up in



Wayne England's Night Lord cover, as you can imagine we are pretty pleased with this issue of *Inferno!*

Finally, I must add that we always appreciate your comments and suggestions, so keep the correspondence coming in thick and fast. You never know, if we ever have some spare space in *Inferno!*, we might even run a Letters Page.

Okay, I must have filled this page by now, so that's enough from me for this issue. I now have two months to create my next editorial masterpiece...

Until then, it's time to dive into the *Inferno!* once again.


Andy Jones
Editor

**Write to us at — INFERNO!, Games Workshop Ltd., Willow Road, Lenton,
Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK**

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Andy Jones

WRITERS

Dan Abnett

Jonathan Green

Alex Hammond

Gav Thorpe

ARTISTS

Mark Gibbons

Kev Hopgood

Ralph Horsley

Logan Lubera

Percy Melbye

Dave Pugh

Jeff Waye

John Wigley

PHOTOGRAPHS

Bright Light Studios

PRODUCTION

Marc Gascoigne

ADMINISTRATION

Judy Purewal

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Gilead's Wake

GILEAD TRIED to sleep, but sleep did not come easy. It had been ten years since his slumber had been sound and calm, untroubled by hoarse cries and the stink of blood.

He sat back against a tree bole in the darkness, at the edge of the glow of the campfire, and looked down the long alpine valley. The fires of a fortified stockade glimmered down there in the night. It looked so small and insignificant a place to be the prize of ten years' questing. Gilead sighed.

This wild place was lonely and remote. It had been several days since Gilead had passed the last settlement, a human village whose name he had not bothered to learn as he rode around it.

There had been a tavern there, where humans gathered to drink and tell each other stories. Gilead wondered what stories they were telling tonight. Perhaps even now, some drunken wretch was slurring out a tale of the House of Lothain, of the deathless warrior, and of his decade of blood-enmity with the Darkling One.

Of course, others at the fireside would mock and scoff and claim this was only a myth, for myths are just myths and the land is full of them. They would sneer that no vengeance was ever so pure, and no pain so bright, not even the particular curse of pain that was Gilead Lothain's.

And they would be wrong.

Gilead's mind filled with darkness, burning darkness that rushed in and ignited the papery memories in his head. He remembered, ten years before, on a night far blacker and deader, flamelight that flickered outside a rusty cage door...

TORCHES RAISED in their fists, two figures shambled back along the stinking passageway that ran beyond the cage.

Is this my death? wondered Gilead. If it was, it would be a relief perhaps. Three days, without even water, chained from an iron rung, suspended like a broken puppet in a cold and airless cave deep in the neglected reaches of the Warrens. His pale skin – for his captors had all but stripped him – was blue with bruises from their regular, gleeful beatings. There was a ghost ache of pain where the fourth finger of his right hand had been.

His captors were at the cage door, grinning up at him, their brutish human faces split with feral glee and slack with wine. They had looked that way the first night, when they had come to take his finger.

'A sweetener,' one had called it.

'To jog the memory and open the purses of your kin,' added the other.

Then they had laughed and spat in his face and opened the jaws of the rusty shears...

'They're goin' to pay, Elf scum!' snarled one now through the bars of the cage. 'We just had us word. They're goin' to pay handsome for your miserable hide!'

'Your brother himself is bringing the bloodmoney tonight!' chuckled the other.

For the first time in three days, Gilead smiled to himself, even though it hurt to smile. He knew that his brother was doing no such thing. These vermin may have been told a ransom was coming, but a rather different surprise was on its way.

For when they kidnapped Gilead Lothain, this Carrion Band had made the last mistake of their lives.

By Dan Abnett

Galeth was coming. Galeth, and five other warriors, the last six fighting sons of Ulthuan that the Tower of Tor Anrok could muster. Even now, they were dropping down the vent of the brick flues west of the Warrens' main entrance, sooty shafts that had once been the outlet for an old mill forge that some said the rat-kind had built under the ground in ages past. Gilead could smell the air that Galeth and the others breathed, feel the coarse burn of the rope on their fingers as they played it out and dropped vertically into the blue dimness.

Galeth Lothain: his brother, his twin. Born a minute after the midnight chime that had marked the first minute of Gilead's life. Born under a pair of crescent moons, within a week of a falling star, born to new snows marked only by a fox's print and the kick of a hare. Good signs, all of them. Good auguries for long, proud, brave lives. Gilead and Galeth, the left and right sides of the mirror, the left and right hands of Cothor Lothain, master of the Tower of Tor Anrok.

Twin siblings are always close... they share so much, not the least of which being the same face. But Galeth and Gilead were closer still, a fact first noticed by his wet-nurse, and then by the tutor summoned by Cothor Lothain to school them in physic and the lore. Their minds worked as one, as if there was a bridge of thought between them. In one room, Gilead could cut his thumb on a whittling knife, and in another part of the tower Galeth would cry out. Riding abroad, Galeth would fall and soak himself to his bones in a frozen stream, and back at home by the fire Gilead would shiver. Their spirits were bound, said Cothor's counsellor, Taladryel. They were one son in two bodies.

So it was, twenty-seven winters after the midnight that welcomed them to life, that Gilead knew of his brother's approach.

He could smell the mildew stink in the dark, half-flooded cisterns where Galeth and his men now waded, charcoal-darkened blades drawn ready. He could hear the slosh of the thick, stagnant water, the scratchings of the vermin, the gentle rustle of the wick crisping in the hooded lantern.

And in turn, he knew that Galeth was sharing his own experience. Galeth could

feel the bite of the chains, the ache of bruises, the throb of his finger's stump. It was a sharp beacon of weary pain that was beckoning him on.



THE WALLED TOWN of Munzig lay in the patchwork of tiny kingdoms known as the Border Princes, south of the Empire. Surrounded by deep forest and shadowed by the jagged profile of the Black Mountains, it was a market town on the River Durich, a stop-over for travellers climbing the forest ways to Black Fire Pass. For over a century, it had prospered. But now Munzig had become a place of fear.

In the town, the citizenry spoke anxiously of the Carrion Band. No one knew their faces, or their strength, or quite what villainy spurred them on except for a craving for gold and pain in equal portions. Tavern rumour said they made their fastness in the Warrens, a crumbling maze of tunnels and subterranean vaults in the foothills of the Black Mountains, a few leagues from the town.

No one knew who had built those tunnels, or how far they ran. Old myths said they were the work of the Skaven, the rat-kin, but myths are just myths, and the land is full of them. There was, for example, a fine fireside tale of how the settlers who founded Munzig had been protected by Elves from the forest, Elves who had summoned up their war forces to drive the Skaven out and make the land safe. Children liked this story especially, squealing with glee as adults did the shrill voices of the rat-kin bogeymen.

Another story said there were still Elves in the forests, living in a beautiful tower that only appeared by the light of the full moon and could never be found by humans. Yet another declared these Elves would reappear to protect the land if the rat-kin ever returned. Unless told to wide-eyed children at bedtime, such a tale would usually be greeted by a hearty laughter and a demand for more drinks.

Then the Carrion Band had come, striking for the first time the summer

before. Ambushing a wagon on the forest road, they had seized the daughter of a local merchant. A ransom was demanded, and desperately paid. The daughter was returned, dead, by the Durich's autumn flood, and the money lost forever. Eight more such crimes followed, gripping the Munzig in a tightening band of fear. Loved ones were taken, monies demanded and blood cruelly spilled. In every case, the families had never dared not pay, even though they knew the odds were slim that they would ever see their kin again. In the taverns, estimates had been ventured as to the fortune so far lost. Thirty thousand gold, said some. And the rest, said others.

Prince Horgan, elector of Munzig, called town meetings and a state of emergency. Trade, the life-blood of the town, had all but dried up. Plans were drawn up by the frightened gentry. Guards were doubled, patrol circuits were widened, gratings were made to block the river sluices under the city wall. By now the old Warrens seemed the likeliest hideout for the Carrion Band, and popular myth spoke of underground passages riddling the town's drains. No one was safe.

Balthezor Hergmund, a merchant whose wife had been the reavers' third victim, had put up a reward and urged the town council to undertake a purge of the Warrens to drive out and exterminate the killers. But even the most willing had to admit the futility of such an act: the Warrens were vast, unmapped and unknown, and the City Militia numbered only four score of irregular infantry and the Prince's own cavalry, a dress unit more used to displays than combat. What about the Elves, the forest Elves? someone had suggested. What about the old pact, the old myth? Wouldn't they help? Laughter – nervous but damning – and another round of drinks.

So the fear grew, the cost in life and gold mounted, and the bloody career of the Carrion Band continued unchecked.



STANGEELY – and ironically, as far as any of the human inhabitants of Munzig were concerned – there *was* a tower out in the forests beyond the town walls, a beautiful tower seldom, if ever glimpsed by human eyes, secreted deep in the wilds of the woods. Called the Tower of Tor Anrok, in memory of the sunken cities, it had for the longest time been home to the House of Lothain, a dwindling familial line who traced their blood back to ancient, distant lands.

There were only a few inhabitants of the secret tower now: old Cothor, too weak to stand, a handful of loyal warriors and womenfolk, and Cothor's twin sons, Galedh and Gilead. Their ancestors had indeed driven out the Skaven from the catacombs now known as the Warrens. But that had been in older, stronger days.

When word of the Carrion Band's molestation of Munzig reached the Tower, it had been Galedh who had wanted to send word to the prince and covertly offer aid. He yearned to begin his warriorhood with a worthy victory, but old Cothor had been unwilling. The Patriarch had decreed that there were too few of them left, their blood too rare, to waste it on what was clearly a human dispute. Human raiders, human prey. Elfling shunned the company of humans, knowing that men regarded them with fear and suspicion. Whatever had happened in the past, the House of Lothain would not rouse itself now.

Galedh had been disappointed, but Gilead, sensing his father's anguish, had taken up the argument and eventually dissuaded Galedh from taking it further. As the eldest, Gilead took his responsibilities to the House and the bloodline with solemn gravity.

It had been a crisp, winter afternoon, three days after this debate, that Gilead had ridden out into the forest with just one companion. Nelthion, the Tower's elderly swordmaster, had trained both boys in the arts of war. Gilead had said they were to exercise the horses, but in truth he had wanted to blow the cobwebs from his mind with a hard gallop through the frosty woodland. A lust for wandering, that gnawed at every Elf, had begun to nag at him too, and he knew it would not be long before he would have to leave Tor Anrok and carve himself a destiny or a good death.

Gilead never knew if it was opportunity or plan; whether the Carrion Band had chanced to hear them riding close and fallen into cover, or if they had deliberately stalked the Tower and watched its comings and goings.

A dozen of them pounced, dropping from trees or sweeping up from under snow-cloaks, humans and a couple of ugly mixed-blood blasphemies. A billhook took Nelthion out of the saddle, and they fell on him with flails. There was blood in the snow.

Gilead turned, his sword loose and scything, though they were many and they were ready. A cudgel smacked him sideways, but he stayed up, spurring his mount to bolt clear. Then another of the reavers killed his horse out from under him with a pike and they closed on him with coshes and sacking.

And so Gilead Lothain came to be the prisoner of the Carrion Band, chained deep in the Warrens. So, too, did he become their first error, for they had not reckoned with the fact that he, unlike all the others – the humans – they had preyed upon, could lead the wrath of his kinsmen right to their hidden lair.



GALETH AND HIS men skirted the lip of a dirty pool, and stepped lightly, like cats, up a buttress twisted by the slow and ancient passage of roots. Gilead smelled the wet soil, felt the weight of Galeth's sword in his hand.

The Carrion Band had not posted sentries. They had every reason to suspect this damp corner of the Warrens would never be located by search parties. Their only concession to chance discovery was a series of tripwires strung out along the slim, natural caves adjoining the vaults they used as a smoke hall and dormitory.

Fithael, Galeth's sergeant, knelt and cut the trips one by one with his bodkin, slowly releasing the tensions on the split cords so the bells sagged without ringing.

Seeing this through sibling eyes, Gilead smiled.

Five arrows were nocked against five tight strings, the men looking to Galeth for the command. Galeth nodded them in, under a mossy, decorated arch where the features of a bas-relief titan had been all by worn away by seeping surface water. They smelled cook fires, sweat, blood and swill from where a hog had been butchered, urine from a latrine. They heard laughter and rowdy voices, and a rasping viol heaving out the tune of a drinking song.

Galeth stepped into the firelight. Gilead's breath caught in his mouth. They both saw the sweaty, puzzled faces that turned to look. The viol stopped, mid-note.

The killing began.

Like a brief drum roll, five hollow beats in quick series marked the five impacts of Elven arrows. Three reavers died on their benches, one toppling into the fire-pit. Another was spun round across the table by a shaft in the shoulder, and passed out across the spilled, smashed pitchers of stolen beer. A fifth was pinned to his chair back by an arrow through the gut and began to scream as the pumping blood covered his lap. His screams rose until they and their unnerving echoes filled the vault and the chambers, like a hideous hell-music to accompany the slaughter.

Across the table in a leap, Galeth met the first two reavers who had managed to find their weapons. All told there were twelve left alive in the smoke-hall, all scrambling for sidearms and bellowing like stuck pigs. Gilead knew of at least another half-dozen asleep in the cellars behind the hall, and so Galeth knew that too.

The Elves put up their bows and surged into close combat behind their young master, who had already sheared one neck with his longsword and was splintering the flail of his second target. Some of the Elves had longswords and bucklers, with a knife brandished in the buckler fist. The others swung long-hafted axes. Smoke and a mist of spittle and blood hung in the damp air. The roar of fighting shook the buried vault.

Fithael, his axe sweeping, cut through the belly of a mailed swordsman and was first into the tunnel to Gilead's cell. As the fighting raged behind him, he pulled the ring of keys off a nail and slammed open the cage door. Old Taladryel, soaked by blood that wasn't his, was at his side a moment later, and together they eased

Gilead down from the chains and wrapped a cloak about him.

'We have him! He lives!' Taladryel bellowed, but Gaeth already knew this. He and two other swords of the Hall cut down the last of the routed Carrion Band. A few survivors, four or five at most, had fled into the Warrens.

Fithael and Taladryel carried Gilead out into the vault to a cheer from the bloodied Elf raiders. Gaeth knelt by his twin and embraced him, tears streaming from both their eyes. Gilead noticed the red weal that circled the fourth finger of Gaeth's right hand.

Fithael put the place to the torch, and they formed up to move out the way they had come, wary of any counter-attack from the reavers who had fled.

No one noticed that the warrior brought down across the table by the first flight of arrows was still breathing. No one saw him stir in the billowing smoke and flames behind them as they moved out beyond the titan arch.

The crossbow made just a tiny snap as it fired.

Gilead's scream froze the souls of his kin. And Gaeth fell, a steel bolt transfixing his heart.



GILEAD WOKE. The moon gazed down at him, full and ghost pale. Somewhere in the forest a wolf howled and was answered. The tree bole against his back was as hard and cold as iron. In the valley below, the stockade lights had been put out.

Gilead shivered. Even after ten years, the dreams came in the night and fell on him like robbers, murdering his sleep.

He got to his feet and stooped to poke at the thin fire. Pine cones had been the main source of fuel, and a thick pungent scent filled his nostrils as he raked at the embers.

Pine, astringent and cleansing, always made him remember the infirmary at the Tower where they had nursed him back to health. His kin had used pine water and

hagleaf to clean his wounds and to soothe his weals and bruises, using the old skills of Ulthuan.

But they had had nothing to nurse the wound in his mind.

He had shared his brother's death, a pain that defied sanity. And after it, he had survived the lingering emptiness left in his mind. Some said he was dying too, that the bridge of thought that he had shared with Gaeth was allowing the slow, cold stain of death to seep through into his body from the other side.

If that was true, Gilead Lothain had been a long time dying... a decade of slow pain since Gaeth had fallen to treachery and spite in the Warrens. Ten years of wandering and blood.

There had been mourning when Gilead left the Tower. Ageing Cothor bewailed the loss of both sons to one crossbow quarrel. Was he to be left with no heir? Was the old house of Lothain, which had been ever since his kind had come to the Old World from Tiranoç, to fall at last?

Gilead had not replied. He had set out. He would return, he told himself, one day when his work was done. But he hadn't returned after five years, when word of his young sister's marriage to the scion of another noble house had reached him. Neither had he after nine when a messenger brought word of Cothor's death. His inheritance awaited.

Still now he did not turn back.

Fithael came out of his tent and found Gilead sat by the fire. The five warriors who had formed Gaeth's raiding party had all voluntarily followed Gilead on his mission. Now only Fithael, lined and trail-worn, was left. Gilead thought of the lonely, godless places where they had buried the others, each one in turn.

Fithael looked at the sky. 'Dawn in two hours,' he said, then paused, as if daring himself to speak the words which came next. 'Tomorrow... that will be the day, at last. Won't it?'

Gilead breathed deeply before answering. 'If the spirits will it.'

Fithael crouched beside Gilead. Even now, after ten years, it pained him to see his master's face, as pale and cold as alabaster, his dead eyes sunk like glittering chips of anthracite in deep, hollow orbits,

his hair the silver of frost. Gilead the Dead, they called him, those that met him on the way and spoke of him in taverns. They said it with a shudder. Gilead the Haunted, the walking corpse whose mind was tied into the hereafter.

'Can I ask you a question?' Fithvael murmured after a while. Gilead nodded without looking at him. 'I have never spoken this before, and only now do I feel it. Ten years we've been, ten years hunting the stinking Foe. Ten years, and every second of it your poor brother deserves. But will it be enough?'

Gilead looked round sharply, eyes hooded and dark. 'What?'

'When tomorrow comes and you slice your blade through that rat-kin's fur... will it be enough?'

Gilead smiled, but it was not a smile that Fithvael liked. 'It will have to be, old friend.'



THE FOE. They didn't know his face. And he had many names – Gibbetath, or the Darkling One, or Skitternister – had first come to Gilead's attention a month or thereabouts after Galeth's funeral, when Fithvael had captured one of the reavers of the Carrion Band hiding out in the woods.

He had been questioned, and it was he who told them of the Darkling One and his secret empire.

Gibbetath was a Skaven. The rat-kin, his mind as sharp as a dagger, was never seen, but his money and his ideas and his schemes orchestrated dozens of clandestine operations across this corner of the Empire. Black market spices ran through his networks, and the skimmed revenues filled his coffers. He arranged mercenaries and spies, and dealt in intelligence to the highest bidder. It was said he had started two wars and stopped another three. His houses in the border towns ran the finest women, and took the fattest cuts. An entire guild of thieves answered to him, and his assassins, shadows all, were the finest gold could harness.

An empire of filth, a vermin's enterprise, a hidden fraternity of thieves and killers and sinners running scams and turning tricks in half a dozen Old World cities to line the pockets of the Darkling One, the mind behind it all.

The Carrion Band and their ruthless cycle of crime had been one of Gibbetath's profitable schemes. He had outfitted the men, furnished them with supplies, presented them with information on likely targets, and took ninety percent of the ransoms, it was said. It was his decision that no hostage be returned alive. It made the band vulnerable.

It was said that the Darkling One was most annoyed when Galeth's raiders exterminated his Carrion Band.

Just think, Gilead mused, how annoyed he would be when scything Elf steel split his head in two.

The Darkling One was his target, his prey. For ten years he had stalked him. The rat-kin was ultimately responsible for Galeth's death, and Gilead swore he would not rest until the Skaven scum was dead. He was – and his regret over this was beyond words – fulfilling belatedly the very quest that Galeth had wanted, to drive the evil out of the Warrens and destroy its source. If he had but listened back then, if he had but agreed...

In ten years he had followed every clue to the Darkling One's whereabouts, destroying every one of the Skaven's operations he uncovered as he slowly closed the noose on his quarry.

In the last three years, the Foe had fought back, sending assassins and war bands to halt the relentless Elven avenger. To no avail. After ten long, bloody years, Gilead was at his door.



DAWN CAME. Gilead struck. He had not really been sure what to expect, but the wooden stockade in the forest was not quite the stronghold he had pictured for the Darkling One. He mused that a surface stronghold seemed unlikely for a creature that dwelt beneath the ground. But the Darkling One had ever been just such a mystery, just such a

contradiction...no one had seen him, or knew him, no one even understood what infernal scheme it was that drove his relentless power-building enterprises.

A tub of Dwarf black powder took out a ten yard stretch of the timber wall, and Fithvaēl picked off the sentries from cover with his bow.

Pikemen clad in fine mail charged Gilead as he strode in through the smoking gap, but his longsword was a deadly blur. He fought as Gaeth had fought. At Gaeth's death, his skills with bow and blade had flowed across that cold bridge in Gilead's mind to merge with Gilead's prowess. One son in two bodies, Taladryel had said. Now, for certain, two sons were in one body.

Blood flecked the ranger's scale mail. He was shadowfast, a killing wraith that sliced through the defenders without mercy or pause.

The human guards – those that weren't cut to tatters – began to break and flee. Pushing through them, two Ogres came at Gilead. Nine feet high, the Ogres' great bulk formed like a buttress wall to block him, foam snorting from their flaring nostrils. One had an axe, the other a morning star.

The axe-wielder moved, swinging his huge flat blade at Gilead. The ranger leapt sideways and, before he could swing again, the hulking beast stumbled back, squealing, an arrow embedded in its left eye. From cover by the breach in the stockade, Fithvaēl loosed two more arrows that dropped the brute dead. The other roared and spun his spiked star at Gilead, but the Elf pressed his attack, closing with the huge foe rather than retreating. He let the enemy's charging weight do the work and impaled him upon his sword.

Silence. Smoke drifted across the smashed stockade and the twisted bodies. Somewhere, a wounded man moaned. Bow ready, his face a mask, Fithvaēl joined Gilead and they looked around. The defence was shattered. The doors of the blockhouse beckoned.

Fithvaēl made to move forward but Gilead stopped him. 'This is the last act,' he said. 'I will face it alone. If I fall here, someone must take word back to my father's house.'

Fithvaēl swallowed hard, but he nodded. Gilead stepped forward alone.

THE BLOCKHOUSE was a long hall, and woodsmoke clung to the rafters.

The interior was dark, deep, dancing shadows thrown by the torches in the wall brackets.

Gilead paused and entered, his blade ready.

His eyes grew accustomed to the gloom. He saw the empty sacks and coffers that littered the floor of the hall. Was this really the heart of the Darkling One's empire?

As if it had heard his thoughts, a voice said, 'Not much, is it?'

Gilead moved into the gloom, and saw at last the thin, miserable human who sat hunched on a high-backed seat at the far end of the hall.

'You are Gilead, the Elf?'

Gilead made no answer.

'My guard said there were only two of you. You and a Bowman. You took my stockade alone, the pair of you?'

'Yes,' Gilead said after a long pause. 'Who are you?'

'You really don't know?' The ragged, sick-looking man gestured around him. 'I am... whatever you call me. The Darkling One. Skitternister, Gibbetath...'

'But-' Gilead began to protest.

'I'm not the rat-kin monster you think you've been hunting? Of course not! Rumours... myths... they help to keep me, and the truth, safer. Or they did.'

The man looked around himself pensively. 'In some towns I was a rat-thing, in others a beast of Chaos. Whatever suited the local superstitions. I was anything and everything. I was a myth.'

'A myth...'

'The land is full of them.' The man smiled.

Gilead wanted the blood to race in his head, the anger to come boiling from within him so he would surge forward and...

But there was nothing. He felt the emptiness, the dismal finality of this wretched blood debt. Was this what Fithvaēl had tried to speak of, the night before when they were sat around the fire?

The puny man got to his feet. Gilead could see how he shook, with a palsy or an ague. He was frail and thin, and his patchy hair was greying. There were bald patches on his scalp, and sores on his parchment skin. He shambled forward

and fixed Gilead uncertainly with wet, rheumy eyes.

'I was richer than kings, Gilead Lothain. My name was just a whisper in the back streets, but for three decades I was more powerful than monarchs. I had palaces, mansions, coffers of gold, an army at my beck and call...'

He paused. 'Then I made the mistake of killing your brother.'

Gilead's hand tightened on his sword hilt.

The man sat down on a small, plain stool, his brittle joints cracking. 'We meet for the first time, but you have destroyed me already. When I first heard you were coming for me, years ago, I thought nothing of it. What did I have to fear from a band of Elf revengers? You would be dead, or tired of the quest, long before you came close to me.'

'But you did not give up. I began to spend money and effort hiring men to dispose of you, setting traps, laying false scents. You avoided them. Still you came. My health began to suffer... nightmares... nerves...'

'Do not expect me to feel sympathy,' Gilead sneered.

The man held up his thin hands in dismay. 'I do not. I merely thought you would appreciate knowing exactly how fully you have broken me. One by one you've burned my palaces and houses, looted my reserves, put my minions to the sword. My empire has crumbled. I have run from fastness to fastness, pouring away my wealth to keep my deserting warriors loyal. And behind me, always, you have come, leaving destruction in your wake.'

He gestured around them at the grim blockhouse. 'This is all that is left, Gilead Lothain. This last humble outpost, those last few soldiers you have killed. I spent half my life scheming my fortune, and then I spent every coin I had trying to protect myself from you.'

He straightened his head to expose his saggy, wizened throat.

'You bastard, Gilead. Take your shot. End my misery.'

Gilead trembled, the sword suddenly as heavy as his heart.

'Do it!' rasped the Foe, leaning closer. 'Finish your revenge and a plague on you! Give me peace!'

Gilead wiped his brow with the back of his hand.

'Do it!' screamed the frantic, wretched ruin of a man, sliding off the stool to his knees.

Gilead stared down at him. 'You want me to end your misery? Cutting you down won't end mine. Ten years ago, I thought it might.'

He turned and stepped towards the door. Behind him, the creature wailed. 'Finish me! I have nothing left!'

'Neither have I,' Gilead said simply, 'and living with that is the true price.'



OUTSIDE, the cold mountain sun burned down through the stands of pine. Gilead spiked his sword in the soil outside the stockade and sat down on a slanted log.

'Is it over?' asked Fithael.

Gilead nodded.

'The Foe is dead?'

Gilead shook his head. Fithael frowned, but knew better than to ask any more.

A meadowlark sang. Somewhere deep in Gilead's mind, a lingering pain began to ebb away.



THE TOWER of Tor Anrok still stands in the forests beyond the town of Munzig. Its grounds are rambling and overgrown, and its windows are empty, like the eyes of a skull. It is just another pile of dead stones in the wilderness.

Some say there is one last Lothain alive, the lost son of Cothor, who will return from the wilderlands one day and unlock the old doors of the hall. They say he roams the furthest edges of the Old World, an undead daemon with a sleepless blade, howling out his pain to the moon and warring with the tribes of Chaos. Some say that death is in his eyes.

Perhaps it is just a myth. The land is full of them. ●

And in the smoke hell of the aftermath, **Fuadar Swooping Hawk** is the last one standing.

The fallen of Ulthwe lay around him, a hundred score, their aspect armour crushed and burnt, burst and lifeless.

But he is alive, and therefore victory belongs to the **Elbar**.

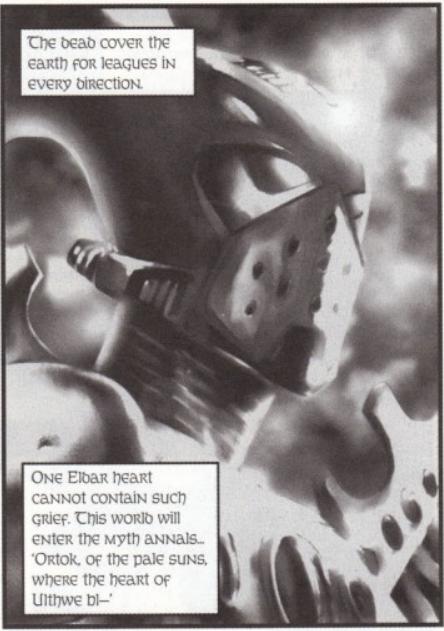
SINGLE COMBAT

SCRIPT: DAN ABNETT • ART: KEV HOPGOOD



ONE OF ULLHWE REMAINS, NONE OF KHORNE. THE **SLIMMEST** OF VICTORIES, yet the **GREATEST**.

And the most **costly**.



The dead cover the earth for leagues in every direction.

One Elbar heart cannot contain such grief. This world will enter the myth annals... 'Ortok, of the pale suns, where the heart of Ullhwe b!—'



A sound!

A keening!



Fuabar moves low, like a hunting cat.

Flight would expose him, and besides his Raptor wings have flown their last.

What he sees makes him forget
the weariness in his limbs...

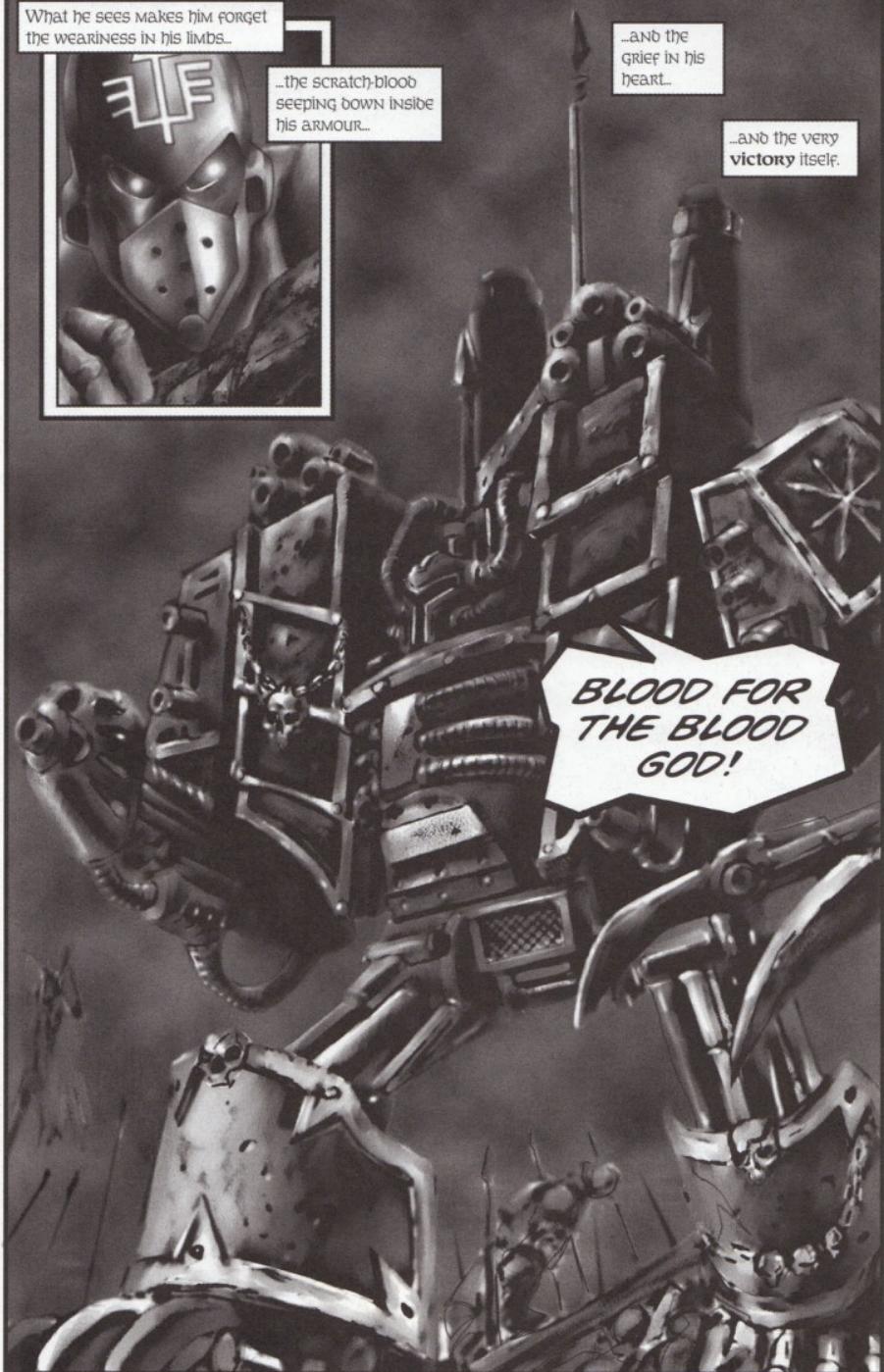
...the scratchy blood
seeping down inside
his armour...

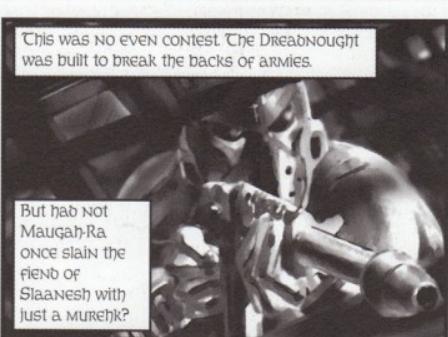
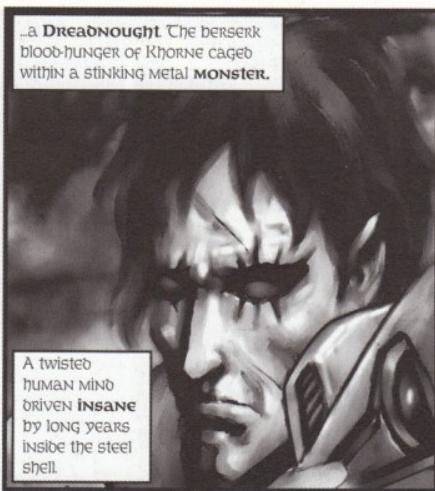
...and the
grief in his
heart...

...and the very
victory itself.



BLOOD FOR
THE BLOOD
GOD!









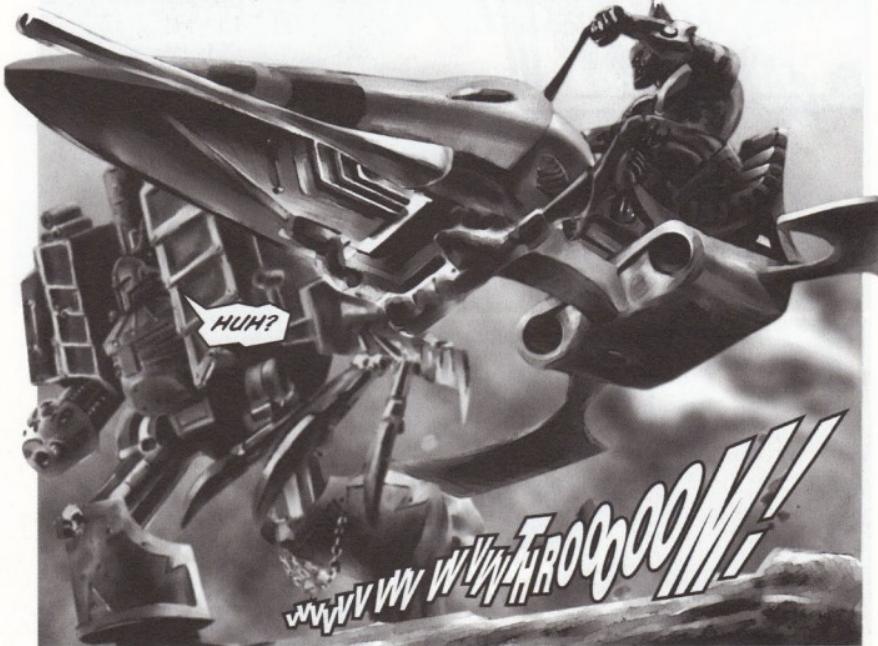
His armour is light for flying. It will not take another salvo like that.



Speed, agility... flight.



Speed and agility were always the best weapons of the swooping hawk aspect.



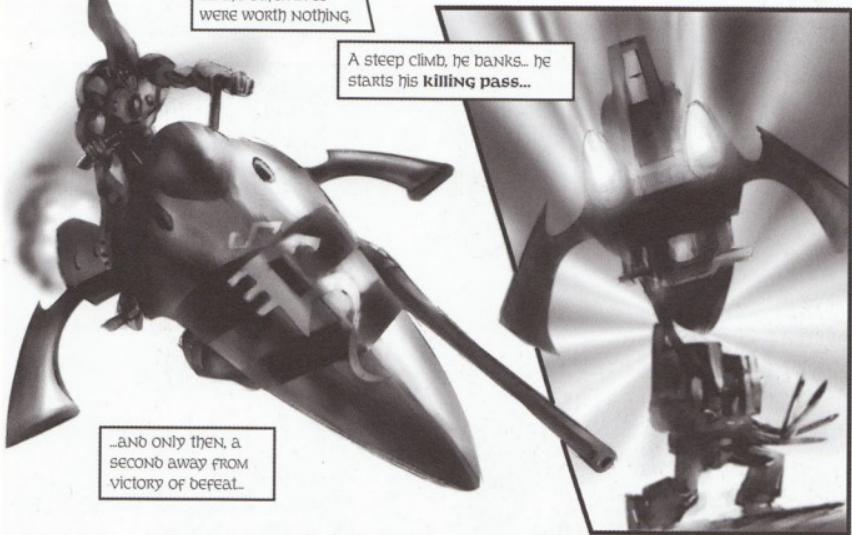
HUH?

WHERE ARE
YOU, ELDAR
VERMIN?! SHOW
YOURSELF, YOU
GUTLESS WORM!

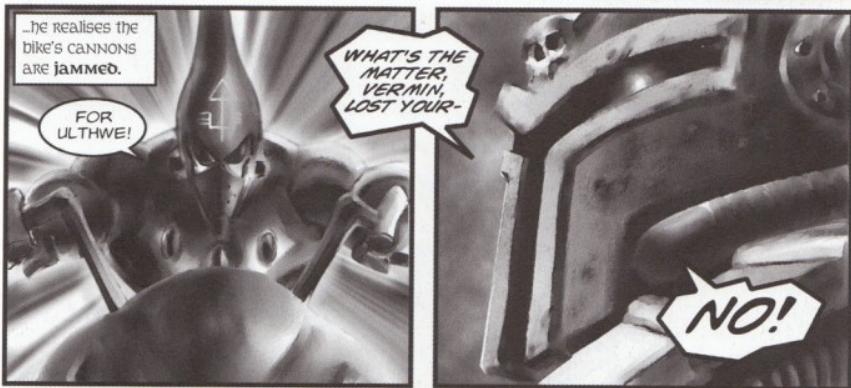
Plasma spits in his wake, but Fuabar evades, turning the jetbike low and hard across the jagged terrain.



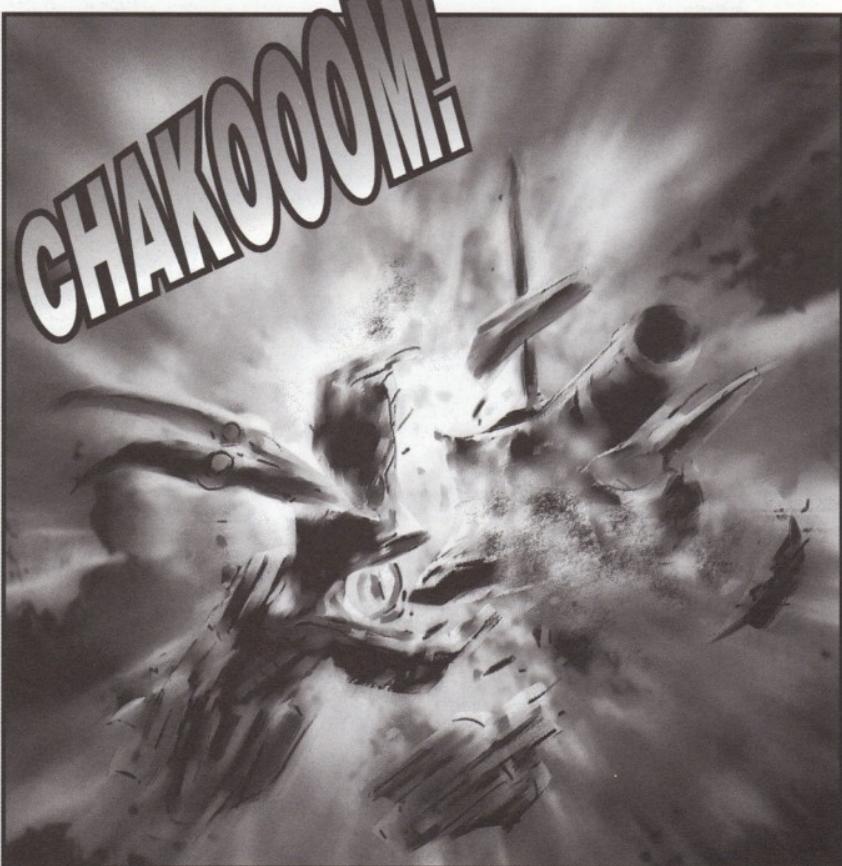
His blood sings. It has come to this – single combat to resolve a war, as if all the other lives were worth nothing.



...and only then, a second away from victory of defeat...



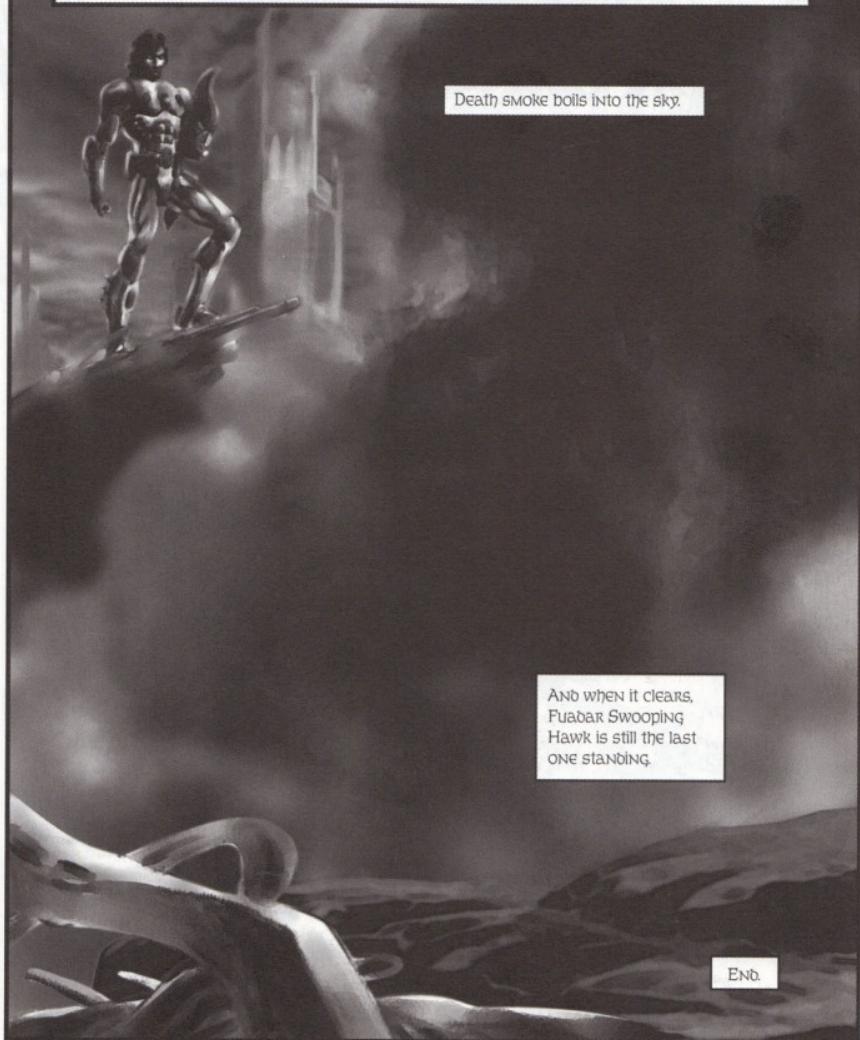
NO!





The dead sing to
him their gratitude.

Death smoke boils into the sky.



And when it clears,
Fuabar Swooping
Hawk is still the last
ONE STANDING.

END.



THE EMPEROR'S GRACE

By Alex
Hammond

THE BURNING FLAMES leapt high, throwing long shadows about the vault. The cold floor beneath his feet refused him comfort. Light robes adorned his body, clinging to him, providing little warmth. Streck stared into the dark, eyes straining to pierce the gloom. Above and all around him, a thick silence suffocated anything that dared to make an impact on the stillness.

A noise. Streck turned, his sleep-clogged eyes still trying to get their bearings amidst the flickering shadows.

The flames flared into monstrous life. The dark corners shrank, betraying the shape of the room. High arching supports held aloft a roof of unimaginable height. Shining steel pipes funnelled the flames into the hall, their light revealing a man in black, military medals peppering his coat. A soft buzzing became apparent; it had always been there, echoing through the halls.

The man, dark-eyed and swathed in the coat and sacred insignia of the Cult of the Emperor, approached. The flames grew, casting light upon a huge lexicon, the Imperial seal burnt into its cover. The dark man stepped forward and opened the book, its pages reflecting flickering light onto his face. Streck stared into his own eyes. The halls erupted with flame. The buzzing grew shrill and flung Streck into the howling consciousness of a warzone.

Screeching attack sirens. His narrow stretcher bed. Bolt pistol in his hand. Streck rose, smoothed his Commissar's uniform, placed his peaked cap on his head and rushed upstairs to his command post.

STILL THE CHIRPING of the large, horned insects had stopped when the bombardment began. Lieutenant Lownes could still see their multi-coloured wings, like stained glass windows, fluttering as the creatures darted desperately between the thick mangrove patches.

'Intelligence of a cat,' Lownes whispered to the young guardsman next to him.

'Sir?'

'Those insects have the intelligence of a cat, soldier.' A pair of kaleidoscope wings hovered close by the man's head. The guardsman raised his lasgun.

'Steady, son. It's just taking a look at you.'

Olstar Prime. Recent Imperial Colony in unclaimed space; a jungle planet rich in deep ores and petro-ethers. Lieutenant Lownes and his squad had been brought in specially from Catachan. Similar climate, similar terrain – High Command figured they'd be perfect for helping in the defence of the main colony installation. The problem was that 'perfect' needs ground support, covering fire and capable shelling, something the last functioning elements of the Valis Fifth Guardsmen and the local garrison on Olstar Prime were a little hard pressed to supply when the word 'Eldar' crackled over the air-waves.

'The orders are clear. We're here to destroy their commander and weaken their position. The local garrison and colonists will try and keep the bulk of their force at bay,' Lownes whispered to his squad huddled in the ebbing shallows of the mangroves. The heat and mist had covered brawny arms and combat knives in a dewy sheen.

'So the rumours are true?' Sergeant Stern said, batting an insect from his pack with the back of his huge hand.

'Yes, we face Eldar. No one's come into contact with them yet, might have



something to do with their technology, but they're definitely out there. The alien devils have the colonists terrified, while the local defence forces have no taste for battle – although facing down those sorcerous weapons doesn't appeal to me either.'

'Shuriken catapults, sir.'

'Sorry?' Lownes looked up, scanning his men.

'Sir.' It was the new guardsman, a young, bullish lad with close-cropped hair. 'Shuriken catapults, they use magnetic impulses, fire spinning discs.'

In mock horror, Lownes made a religious symbol in the air. 'Didn't know we had an Eldar expert amongst us. What kind of heretic are you?' He laughed and a cloud of insects rose from the ferns around him. 'Glad to have you along.' Not even a chuckle from his squad. They were apprehensive, Lownes knew it. 'Make it clean and we'll make it through, Emperor willing. See you all at base camp.'

The Jungle Fighters each gripped their nearest comrade by the forearm, in a brief, silent display of camaraderie.

'Alright.' Lownes released the young soldier's arm. 'Let's move out.'

There is a skill to moving in waist high water and ignoring the strange movements brushing past. The Jungle Fighters of Catachan have got it down to a fine art – that and at least four unarmed fighting styles and extensive weapons training.

The bulbous mangrove trees sat still, the only things with sense enough not to try and move about in the quagmire. Lownes led his squad into cover behind a vine-swathed clump of the trees. Spiny trunks scratched at the exposed flesh of the fighters. A cocktail of combat drugs staved off all but the most extreme of injuries. Many a fighter had lived to see another day thanks to the potency of the Imperial Chemists' brews.

A splash in the water to the left of the squad brought their honed reflexes into action. As silent as nightfall, Stern raised his lasgun. Lownes grabbed his infra-red scope and peered through it.

An Eldar, with a long, fluted pistol-like weapon strapped to its steel-slim body armour. It moved gracefully through the water; the swamp seemed to have little effect on its movement. Soft, discordant sounds, like an unearthly wind, came from the alien's respirator. Five, six... seven in

total. Outnumbering them and unseen, Lownes had the drop on them. Yet the men shuddered as the beings came into view.

Three sharp gestures from their commander and the squad went into action. Lownes tugged on two grenades and timed them long. They splashed into the water beside the two Eldar on point. One moved close to the ripples in the water and stared upwards, assessing where they had come from. A second too late. The frag grenades cracked loud over the swamp. Burning body armour, flesh seared to metal, splashed into the water about Lownes's squad. Waves rushed about the grove. The Jungle Fighters leapt into the thick grenade smoke as the remaining Eldar sprayed humming death from their shuriken catapults.

Tree bark and burnt foliage dropped down into the silent world of the swamp as Lownes swam in the shallows towards the unsuspecting Eldar. Half his squad followed, respirators bubbling air to the surface the only sign of their passing.

Chainsword spinning, Lownes exploded out of the water; the squad followed, lasguns firing controlled bursts into the mass of body-armoured warriors about them. The needle-sharp teeth of Lownes's mechanical sword ripped into an Eldar, removing wrist and weapon in one fluid motion.

The aliens fell back in the face of the Jungle Fighters' numerical superiority, standing behind the tallest of their number, dressed differently in flowing robes and strange elongated helmet. A pair of green eye sockets glowed. The robed figure raised its hand. A spray of low-powered lasfire from the remaining Eldar channelled into one massive bolt that swept through the Jungle Fighters. Stern and four other men fell to the beam, identification tags and flesh fusing in one. The remainder of the squad threw themselves away from the gunfire and found precarious cover behind what remained of the mangrove trees.

The battlefield was still.

'Their leader, it's... it's psychic,' the new guardsman stammered to Lownes.

'I guessed, son.' Grim faced, Lownes struggled to suppress the drugs in his blood that screamed at him to rush into deadly action against the Eldar. 'It doesn't matter. They're all the same when they're dead.'

FOR THE PURITY of the Empire, in deed and mind. Let my body be a machine of war. Let courage be my companion and never let it leave my side even in my darkest hour. Blood spilt in the name of the Emperor is glory; fear is the death of courage and the death of me.

Commissar Streck prayed, staring down from the fire base at the jungle below him. Pitch floated on the shallow waters, blazing in the lasfire glare, only to show the deaths of more Imperial Guardsmen. The screams of the dying echoed through the low ridges. Many of the Valis Fifth would die in battle for the Emperor today. The dead were in their own realm now and had their own judges. It was not for Streck to judge the dead, but to monitor the living and see that they showed courage in battle. His commission was brief and to the point: *Spiritual guidance necessary. Instil courage and condemn fear. Victory unlikely.*

A rocket screamed through the air and collided with the armour of the steel plateau on which Streck stood. The Commissar grabbed hold of the railing but it came away, rusted at the joints. He rolled backwards, almost off the edge of the platform. Below him he could see the vile Eldar closing in, unseen by his men. The line of bases that acted as the first defence, out in the tangled jungle, were falling. Streck's sinewy arms strained as he hoisted himself back to relative safety.

The Commissar stumbled through the smoking wreckage of the lower levels of the base checking bodies, administering the Emperor's Grace to those who could not be saved. He made for the remaining soldiers huddled beneath the main supports of the fire base. Pip-pupilled terror screamed in their eyes; shaking hands drooped lasguns at the floor. Because of the smoke they had not seen him yet.

One of the guardsmen stood and staggered out of the bunker. Streck prayed that he'd turn back. *For fear is the enemy of man. It stays his weapon in anger and dilutes his potency.*

'State your name and rank, soldier.' The guardsman staggered round as Commissar Streck stepped out from the smoking wreckage.

'I, uh, I need a medic.' The guardsman blinked, blurry-eyed, as the black overcoat and cap of the Imperial Commissar swam before his eyes.

'Name and rank?'

'Retner Ganch, Guardsman, Valis Fifth, sir.' The words dribbled from the slumped-shouldered shape.

'Are you aware of the punishment for desertion?'

'Can't fight... lost gun, lost fingers.' Ganch wriggled the nubs of a bloodied stump.

'And for each who has turned their back on battle there will be death. For they are dead already as weapons for the Emperor and lost to his halls of glory.'

As Streck spoke the sentence, the guardsman dropped to his knees, tears streaming down from his blood-shot eyes. 'Even worse are those who show fear in the face of judgement, for in death they have neither pride nor glory.'

Commissar Streck raised his pistol to the guardsman's head, distancing himself so that the deserter's blood would not stain his clothes. He squeezed the trigger gently.

'If we must die, then we will die with courage,' Streck turned and bellowed at the remaining men. Another rocket struck the base, tearing through both plascrete and armour plating, but he did not flinch. 'The Emperor rewards those who show courage. They will join him at his halls and be recorded for ever in the annals of our heroes.'

Streck looked across the faces of the men before him. Youths, none more than two decades old, stared back at him. Mass-produced helmets rested loosely on their heads; the fit was almost always imperfect and required firm straps to provide any protection. Giddy-eyed and silent, the guardsmen sat ineffectually in the mud.

Streck was sick with rage. These men had not even caught sight of the aliens that assailed them, yet they were terrified.

'Do you not fear the death of a coward? There is no place for them. They will be spurned and hated by their fellow men, for they did not fight to better humanity. They lie slack-kneed and stupefied as the daemon weapons of the Eldar come closer, every second making the last moments of their life those of a coward!'

Streck fired his pistol into one of the trembling guardsmen. A brief shriek was all he relinquished. The dead man slumped forward, helmet tumbling into the blood-slick mud.

Shaking hands now readied weapons and began to release rapid volleys of lasfire

through the fire-slits in the remaining parts of the bunker. Streck, pleased, set himself against a supporting beam and began to fire into the undergrowth, praying that his shots would ring true. He knew they were being surrounded. He could sense the unholy beings gathered in the swamp about them. Dusk was coming and they would renew their assault in the night, their alien eyes penetrating the darkness.



LOWNES, KNEE HIGH in swamp water, fingered his last grenade. 'I need cover, all of you. And make it clean.' Lownes stripped off his pack and readied his lasgun. 'On my mark.'

'One.' Lownes twisted the grenade's pin. 'Two.' The squad raised their rifles. 'Three.' Thrashing through the water like a charging beast, Lownes ran for an embankment close to the Eldar. The squad fired in unison, lasers slicing jungle vines and igniting small gas pockets. The fury of their renewed assault scythed through the Eldar. They shot down all but the robed leader, the dead aliens' body armour cracking open to reveal pale skins glistening like shelled oysters.

An immense geyser of swamp water reared into the sky. Lownes had almost stood on his own grenade. In the second that the water spouted, Lownes tumbled out from behind cover and started firing at the robed Eldar. Lasfire crackled about it. Lownes threw himself at the Eldar Psyker, chainsword sending rapid pulses up his arm. The eldritch being brought up its thin staff to parry the blow.

Sparks danced around crackles of energy. Lownes reeled within the electrical maelstrom. Death only a heartbeat away, the seasoned Jungle Fighter threw down his lasgun and snatched at his combat knife. On his knees, Lownes plunged the simple blade into the Eldar's side. The field dissipated. The chainsword shattered jewels and mesh armour. Like a burst of air rushing forth from a vacuum seal, the Psyker expired.

THE SWAMP HOWLED with the sounds of the night creatures, their shrill, staccato voices beating at the air like tiny hammers upon a discordant chime. Streck found some solace in the noise. He had heard that the Eldar possessed keen senses, their hearing unmatched. These night calls would make them uncomfortable. As if on cue, a shot rang out in the darkness and the screeching stopped, only to start again a few seconds later. Streck chuckled. He had long since learnt to find pleasure in his enemies' pain.

What remained of his command force lay scattered about the wrecked bunker. Eyes downcast, each man sat contemplating his fate. Some men looked over the personal possessions they kept about them: gang bandannas from their home world, farewell gifts from lovers, trinkets and keepsakes of all descriptions. Others simply stared at the mud, or shivered in the swamp water. Only a few talked. In one instant it occurred to Streck how far these men had been gathered from to defend this jungle planet. How each had come from the distant world of Valis to die together in defence of the greater cause. The power of the Emperor was vast. He prayed the Great One would smile on them tonight.

Streck had ordered the men to conserve their energy packs. Until such a time as someone got a clean aim at an Eldar, no one was to fire.

Silent as death's scythe, a spinning disc as fast as light skimmed into the armoured shell and struck the man closest to Streck in the head. His face a bloodied mess, he died before he could scream.

The guardsmen fired wildly into the darkness. Lasfire lit up the bunker for a few seconds.

'No! Where I'm firing,' Streck screamed. 'Fire on my lead!'

The men still fired in all directions. A wave of enemy fire swept down into the bunker and cut more guardsmen down. Limbs severed, screams ceased. Their wild firing was serving only to reveal their positions. A flash revealed two Eldar rushing forward from the dark cover of the mangroves. Their feet hardly splashing the shallow water, they moved with terrifying grace, long hair running wild from hard armour crafted from sorcerous materials. Chainswords screaming, they fell upon the revealed guardsmen, slicing through flesh and bone like it was water.

Streck spun and levelled his bolt pistol at the carnage. Men were falling by pairs, dual cries of terror sending others running.

'Hold your ground! For the Emperor!' Streck felled one of the Eldar, three shots cutting cleanly through the lurid helm of the alien degenerate. The butchery stopped for a second. The remaining Eldar withdrew its spinning blades from the carcass of a dead man and let the glowing green eyes of its helm look the Commissar up and down.

'Let the Emperor's might be mine!' Streck spat bloody spittle as explosive shells cracked from his pistol, jarring his hand and throwing him backwards.

The alien leapt high over the Commissar's shots. The shells burst against the roof of the bunker, each getting closer to the lightning-fast Eldar as it sailed through the air. Streck tumbled through the mud, listless limbs flapping against the ground as the Eldar darted after him, twin swords held high above its head like a matador.

Streck kicked a trembling guardsman into the path of the Eldar and it cut him down without slowing. Shots rang off his assailant's carapace. Streck rushed a prayer to the Emperor.

Steaming with sulphurous heat, the Eldar dove at Streck. Bracing for the pain, the Commissar blinked. It was all the time needed. Opening his eyes again, Streck looked up and traced the jittering death spasm of his assailant. It lay on the end of a large, crude chainsword. Engraved words following the blade read Catachan IV.

Lieutenant Lownes, dour face slick with the heat, looked down at the Commissar. 'It would appear you're surrounded.'



T TOOK SOME moments to cover the dead and regroup under the dripping steel bunker. Half the fortification was ripped open down one side, and Lownes set two Jungle Fighters to blocking it with whatever rubble they could scavenge and cram into the space without being shot.

'Why did they let you through, lieutenant?' Commissar Streck asked from above them.

'False hope. You've held out this far – thought you'd be saved.' Lownes continued bandaging a guardsman's arm. 'There's only five of us. Not nearly enough to help dig you out of this one.'

'We're doomed? Is that what you think, lieutenant?' Streck stared into the Catachan's eyes.

Lownes stood and gestured at the huddled, forlorn figures. 'No, it's what they think.' He grinned at the Commissar. 'I've been in worse situations than this.'

'Really?'

'Well they're not Tyranids, that's a start.'

Streck turned his back on the Catachan and looked out through the dark hole that was once a bunker wall. 'I will wait until daybreak until I command the men to attack. We make our stand here. The glory of the Emperor will aid our fight.'

'They won't let us make it through to daybreak. They'll shell this bunker to rubble before they let us see their positions. We need to set a trap, lure some in and get out of here,' Lownes replied. The Commissar turned to face him.

'When the Great One was fighting the foul Horus, do you think he set about creating a trap to "lure" him to his death. With will alone he defeated the fiend, not simple tricks. Was he not—'

Lownes shook his head. 'Commissar. Sir. I am not questioning doctrine, rather trying to get my men and yourself out of here alive. Glory can wait for another day.'

'Glory must be the sole aim of each man, each day. His mind a temple, his body a weapon in the service of the Emperor.'

Lownes looked up at the roof, then fixed Streck with a steely glare. 'I hate to say it, sir, but this particular temple should be condemned, and all of the Emperor's weapons are down to their last few shots.'

The preparations took only a few moments. Lownes and his men scampered in and out of the bunker, low to the ground like crabs. Others ran the detonating cable they'd scavenged from the burnt-out fire base along the ground. Commissar Streck looked on, his face a granite scowl. In his head he played through the various positions he could take. From depths he had not penetrated for some years he drew out fragments of doctrine, of teachings and precedents. The rebellion on Ultar III, bloody merciless suppression, the Emperor's Grace for those whose minds

were mortally fatigued. Streck formulated, stipulated and prepared his judgement, dark eyes impenetrable to those who would dare look the Commissar in the face.

Only one man did. 'Commissar, we are ready, thank the Emperor,' Lownes called from a precarious position atop the bunker.

Streck stood well back. The Catachan Jungle Fighters had jury-rigged several grenades at weak points about the rubble strewn about the outer walls of the bunker.

'There's double-thick plating up that end,' Lownes said, pointing. 'Everyone up there.'

'What exactly are you suggesting we do, lieutenant?' Streck sneered.

'We've rigged the outside with explosives. This bunker is now one big grenade.' Even Streck shuddered at this suggestion. 'All we need to do is lure them in and let it rip.'

'How do you propose we do that?'

'Surrender,' Lownes grinned.

'Alien heretics are not known for taking prisoners.'

'Exactly.'



'I DON'T SEE THEM coming.' The jungle was still in the bright dawn light. The small figure shuffled forward towards the edge of the clearing, gazing nervously all around him.

'You won't until they're close enough to make a kill,' Lownes called, keeping his voice low. He continued staring out from the bunker, lasgun sight fixed on the young guardsman.

'They're fast, sir.'

'I know, son. That's why I sent you out there. You've got reflexes that would make the Departmento Munitorium consider giving you special training.' Lownes was nervous too. He couldn't make out any movement in the faint light of the waking day.

'Think so, sir?' The guardsman lowered his white flag for a moment as he looked back over his shoulder.

'Keep your eyes sharp, soldier.'

'Well?' Streck's voice rung the length of the bunker.

'Nothing yet, Commissar.' Lownes flicked his head; sweat had saturated his bandanna and was beginning to run into his eyes. 'Tense, isn't it?'

'You make sure your men are ready and I'll take care of mine.' Streck turned his back on him and stalked the length of his retinue.

Lownes motioned with his hand and the three remaining Jungle Fighters crept forward, keeping their heads low. 'We have the surprise,' Lownes whispered to his men. 'We may be outnumbered but we've been through much worse and lived. Get through this and I'll look into getting us into Segmentum Solar, closer to home.'

Streck's voice came ringing down the length of the bunker as he walked along the line of nervous Imperial Guardsmen. 'Fear is the province of the weak and unworthy. There is no glory for those who run from battle or fail to raise their weapon in anger. Others who come after you will remember this day if you fight with valour. We are outnumbered - this planet is destined to be taken. There are too many of the obscene, enemies of the Emperor and too few of his servants.' Streck removed a copy of the Imperial Scriptures from his overcoat. 'I am a hard man but I give you my blessing for what it is worth. *For each man lost*—'

'Lieutenant! They're coming!' the guardsman screamed from outside, running hell for leather for the bunker.

'Keep that flag waving!' Lownes yelled as he motioned his men into action. A tall, slender shape, moving fast amongst the trees, took aim on the young guardsman. Lownes reached out and grabbed the sprinting soldier by the lapels, swinging him into safety. A dozen shuriken ripped the white flag out of the guardsman's hand, shredding it against the thick concrete wall.

Honed reflexes snapping into action, one of the other Jungle Fighters raised his lasgun and cut the alien down with a single shot. Its seared body armour glowed faintly in the dawn light as it dropped like cut bamboo into the swamp. The Catachan Jungle Fighters fell back from the bunker opening, firing neat bursts at the charging Eldar as they crossed the clearing.

'Everyone back... and pray this works.' Lownes snatched up a small control panel, twenty lines patched into it. The first inhuman figure was silhouetted in the bunker's doorway.

'Everybody down!'

'Emperor protect us!' Streck cried as Lownes slammed his hand down on the panel.

A rush of air, like a deep space air lock blowing, dragged at the Imperial Guard huddled in the bunker. Men cried and blood burst from ear drums as the explosion raged through the confined space. Flame rushed about the soldiers, setting some alight. Lownes grabbed the brave young guardsman and threw his flaming body to the ground, holding him down to smother the flames. Commissar Streck screamed prayers to the Emperor as the flames rose higher. Then silence.



STRECK WAS THE first to open his eyes. Gashes in the bunker roof bled shafts of light into the dust-choked darkness. The pages of his book of scripture lay scattered and burning about his collapsed body.

The Commissar struggled to his feet and staggered out of a ripped hole into the warm dawn air. It was filled with the smell of burning steel, harsh and metallic, lapping at the edges of his nostrils. A dozen Eldar lay on the ground; some moved, others lay still. Streck stumbled towards one of the aliens, its leg pinned to the ground by a steel girder. The Eldar flapped uselessly at the beam, the blood running freely onto the ground marking the minutes it had left to live. Streck dropped to his knees and grappled with the creature's helm, ripping it from side to side, rocking the bonds that fastened it loose. The Eldar slapped at Streck, making limp, childlike attempts to knock him to the ground. Streck stumbled backwards as the helm came loose, revealing the pale white skin of the alien.

'Heretic scum,' Streck panted. 'Look upon the face of Man!' Streck raised his bolt pistol and held it to the Eldar's forehead. The alien closed its eyes and sat still. Streck holstered his weapon and pulled himself to his feet using the girder that impaled the Eldar. The creature screamed, a hollow, soulless noise. 'No mercy for you, degenerate.'

'Commissar, get down!' Lieutenant Lownes burst from the bunker, lasgun under each arm. Streck snapped his head around and saw several more Eldar rushing from the shadows of the jungle, fluted weapons pointed in his direction.

Streck fell backwards and pulled an Eldar body over him just as a barrage of spinning discs collided where he had been standing. Lownes unleashed a volley of burning hot laser fire from each of his weapons. They seared Eldar armour, sinking deep into the soft flesh beneath. A humming shuriken clipped Lownes's arm. Reacting to the stinging pain, the seasoned warrior dropped to his stomach to give himself cover.

'For the Emperor!' Lownes called from his prone position, waving his hand high in the air.

The remaining Imperial Guardsmen opened fire, using the precarious cover of the destroyed bunker. Their shots flashed through the superheated air, slamming into both Eldar and muddy swamp.

From the edges of the vegetation, Lownes's Jungle Fighters unleashed everything they had. Streck had not seen them move through the mangroves to cut off the Eldar. Grenades threw wads of swamp filth up into the air, toppling the Eldar.

Lownes lunged forward, holstering one lasgun in order to unstrap his chainsword. A wounded Eldar lurched forward at Lownes from the swamp. Its chainsword whirled close to Lownes's head, bone teeth spitting mud across his face. Lownes brought his own sword up against the Eldar's. The creature slammed a quick succession of blows against the Catachan, Lownes catching each with a narrow parry. He held the last of the Eldar's blows on his chainsword, drove his lasgun into the alien warrior's chest and fired. The force from the gun threw the Eldar back into the muddy water, its chainsword still spinning as it jerked in a death spasm.

Lownes caught sight of the Commissar's muddy uniform amidst the dead Eldar.

'You still alive, Commissar?' Lownes said, dragging an Eldar body off Streck.

'I will not run. Help me to my feet and let me fight for my glory.'

'You've got shell shock. It might only be temporary.'

'Let me fight,' Streck spluttered, blood trickling out of his ears and mouth.

'You're hardly able to stand. You'd better serve the Emperor by getting out of this alive, sir. We must retreat.'

Lownes hoisted the Commissar onto his shoulder and began to stagger through the swamp, away from the battle. Streck fired his pistol uselessly in the direction of the remaining Eldar forces.

'Fall back to the main installation!' Lownes shouted over the noise of the battle.

'No!' Streck cried. 'We hold our ground and fight to the last!'

The ragged band moved in increments from the bunker, some supporting others on their shoulders. Every few steps, men would have to take cover and return fire on the advancing Eldar. Lownes kept pace with the men, hacking aside any vines or large fronds that slowed their progress. After an hour's forced march, guns levelled every step of the way in fear of more Eldar, the guardsman reached the central installation, the key Imperial defence position in this sector of Olstar Prime. Lownes staggered forward, the Commissar struggling on his back, until he passed under the heavy gates to the compound and fell to his knees.

'How dare you challenge a Commissar!' Streck screamed at Lownes as the lieutenant knelt, panting on the ground, his face crimson. The Commissar flailed himself to his feet, tottered for a moment and then stood erect. 'How long have we been out of the battle?'

'It's over, Streck.'

'Over?'

'The surviving elements of the Fifth are returning; my men are guiding them through the jungle as we speak.'

'They know the way back!' Streck snapped.

'They're taking an alternate route.'

'Creeping back like dogs on their bellies!'

'The same way we got back alive.'

'You have threatened my immortality today, Lownes. I have fought gloriously in every battle I have joined. I have never turned my back on the enemy. I have suffered countless wounds and remained alive, to fight again for the sanctity of man and the honour of the Emperor!'

'Save your preaching,' the Catachan said, shaking his head. 'I serve the Emperor just like you, but I would rather fight than die a lone fool striking out against a hundred enemies. If I can find a way to make a

difference I will, but I will not die in some forsaken swamp for no reason other than glory.'

'Glory is found through death.'

'Glory is what I make of it.'

Commissar Streck stared at the Jungle Fighter. Both men stood still, Lownes's eyes cast to the ground.

'I'm going to find my men.' Lownes turned his back and left the compound.



HE STOOD TALL amongst the returning Imperial Guardsmen. The battle over, few walked upright, their energy spent. Even those unwounded walked like men with a death sentence, their eyes towards the ground, bodies tense with dread resolve. Amidst scant cheers, the Catachan Jungle Fighters arrived, leading the guardsmen through the massive barricade gate. Catachan, a planet of fringe dwellers, souls sworn to the Emperor despite lives spent in obscene pursuits. For Streck these troops were worse than the barbarian Outriders. They fought in no formation, wore no real uniform, misused weapons and showed no honour in battle. They did not stand and fight but nipped at the enemy's heels like dogs.

Lownes stood at the head of the returning men, his face dour, despite his heroics on the battle field. No cheer passed his lips, no smile broke his face. Dead and living travelled through the gates. Bodies upon stretchers covered by shrouds soon separated from the file of men; like driftwood cast out of the sea by waves, they were directed towards the morgue and crematorium. Above everything hung a persistent roaring, as merchant ships – not bound by illusory notions of duty and honour – heaved into orbit from the refugee-choked landing pads, every space filled with those who could afford today's asking price.

Streck followed the Jungle Fighters through the complex. People scurried about frantically like ants, laden down with bundles of equipment and rations. Many of the civilian buildings had been stripped,

guardsmen protecting the military installations. Streck was unsurprised by the Catachan's destination when they finally pushed open the crude metal doors of the last open saloon. In the dim light, a woman divesting herself of clothing betrayed their motives.

So soon after the glory of battle! Streck was sick with the thought of what these men were truly like. No sooner had their bodies done the glorious work of the Emperor than their weak spirits drove them into the clutches of flesh and alcohol.

Without really thinking what he was doing, the Commissar entered through the back of the saloon, clutching what remained of his tattered book of scripture tightly in his hand. The bar owner's pockmarked face twisted white as the agent of the Emperor's law entered. Streck sat amidst the din and smoke and watched. He had never entered the saloon before; military business had never given him reason to.

The woman moved listlessly. Streck assumed she was shutting out the desperate, doomed faces of those about her, the reminders of her own fate. The Catachan were more sullen than earlier. They drank and watched the woman dance with loveless eyes. Streck looked across their faces. Scarred, brows furrowed, they stared dark-eyed into their glasses. Their lips moved in crude motions, mouting words with such effort that Streck could read their lips through the filth laden air.

Glasses. Streck hadn't realised until now. Every soldier drank, bar one. Lieutenant Lownes just stared into the table, into darkness. Streck considered the man. He had disgraced so many by leading them in a retreat from the battle. Perhaps he had realised the truth of his actions, felt the guilt of a coward. Streck considered the value of a court martial again. It would set a precedent, of course, but men bearing ranks as high as Lownes's were not exempt from execution.

Lownes stood, bade farewell to his men and left the saloon. Drifting after him, Streck weaved through the crowded room, all eyes turned away uncomfortably moments before he passed. Streck knew this behaviour as shame.

For those who serve the Emperor well know their actions are true and will only receive praise.

ATROPICAL HEAT washed over Olstar Prime, sucking fluid from every pore. Streck stalked Lownes through the compound: Lownes striding forward, a giant powerhouse riding the waves of combat drugs that still tingled along his limbs; Streck lean, tall, keeping pace. Lownes returned to the steady flow of the dead through the colony gates. He walked amongst them, pulling back each sheet.

Streck hung back and watched, trying to pierce the motivations of this man. His reports described him as a loose cannon, but honoured numerous times with no less than thirty successful engagements to his name. He himself had seen how the Jungle Fighter had led his men and those thrown in with him by fate. He spoke the words of the faithful and did not show any signs of heresy – but he had challenged a superior officer and refused the command of a Commissar. Offences punishable by death, yet Streck remained undecided.

Lownes walked along the 'Road of the Dead', as the colonists called it, for it led to the installation morgue. A house that might contain his body one day, and if not this one, definitely some other mortuary in another dark place of the galaxy. Streck had long known that Imperial Guard drop pods often contained morgues, as though death was just another element of battle that needed to be taken care of.

Lownes entered and approached the line of bodies gradually being pushed towards the furnace. Streck watched as the lieutenant continued his dismal search. The end result: five shrouded figures, red bandanas draped across them. Lownes stood over them in the damp chill of the vault. Drawing out his combat knife, Lownes held out his left forearm; steely muscles twitched as he scored five long gashes across it. Placing each body bag into the crematorium, Lownes ignited them. Once they were consumed he rubbed some of the combined ashes produced by the furnace into the wounds. Ritual scarification: crude but not without honour, Streck mused.

A steel stretcher-bed in the barrack block was Lownes's next port of call. The Catachan end of the barracks was covered in an array of war trophies and coloured banners. It was far short of the Spartan neatness that Streck called for in his own thorough examinations of the Imperial Guard quarters. Streck's aversion to the

Catachan Fighters had never led him past this part of the barrack compound. Now he peered in through a window like a thief.

In the still of nightfall, Lownes produced his lasgun and began stripping it down with rapid, staccato movements, each hand operating on its own task. Streck watched Lownes go through this ritual again and again, mesmerised by the symphony of assembly and disassembly. The soldier's wounds still wept, yet he ignored the pain.

Streck considered for long moments. He knew that a mould must be flexible enough to create versatility in what it cast. In those days of judgement, the Emperor cast and recast his actions, each one different, each one enough to hold back the traitors and heretics that threatened the purity of Man. Had he not done so, the pattern of his thinking would have been revealed, he considered, and his battle strategies useless. Skills Streck still believed he must hone. Maybe he should teach himself a little more flexibility in both strategy and judgement.

Let Lownes be the man he must, Streck thought; let him be cast from the mould a little rough around the edges. Perhaps it was a test set by the Emperor, a test of his ability to reason with the faith to have the courage to engage fully with the codices, not just the Lore of Punishment and Retribution alone. After all, had not Lownes served the Emperor well? Maybe the Catachan should not be condemned so harshly for his actions.

Streck had learnt long ago never to let down his guard. Two years ago, three Imperial Guardsmen had attempted a mutiny whilst he was engaged in combat with a renegade Marine. Their escape was forever burnt upon his mind.

The rustle in the bushes beside the barracks was entirely noticeable. Streck caught sight of a figure darting into the barracks. A surprise attack? Bolt pistol at the ready, he peered into the room again. In the darkness he saw two figures – Lownes and a second, a woman. Streck peered harder but could only make out silhouettes. A flare of light from within and for an instant Streck saw all. Lownes's torso, exposed, deep cuts and wounds wet with blood. The deep orange flashes emanated from a cauterising device the woman was applying.

When his wounds were treated, Lownes leaned to pull a pack from beneath his bed.

He had carried it with him throughout the battle. Streck had paid it no heed, figuring it for rations or repair equipment – he knew the tales of the Catachan's self-sufficiency.

The Jungle Fighter opened the bag and held it open for the woman. Streck could see her properly now as she looked appraisingly over the contents of the bag. She was striking, hair cut short in the style of a native Catachan, a long scar running down one cheek to the point of her sharp chin. Her jump-suit and flak jacket showed she was not a soldier; a merchant guild badge hanging from her chest was all that identified her.

The woman reached into the bag and began to examine its contents, Lownes's solid form obscuring them from Streck's view. The Commissar hurried quietly around to the half-open door and found he could see completely into the room.

'You will help me get my men off this place?' Lownes was saying.

'Lownes, how long have you known me for?' the merchant replied, sifting through the bag.

'A long time... since we were young. But I know this is just business. This will make up the final payment.'

'Given that I don't have enough time to barter you down, I'll agree – but that's only because I know you, Lownes.'

'And that's passage for all of them.'

'We've got just enough room.' The merchant turned.

At last Streck saw what Lownes was trading: Eldar weapons!

'Lieutenant!' the Commissar burst into the room, bolt pistol drawn.

'Streck!' The half-assembled lasgun lay on the bed beside Lownes. He reached for it but its parts clattered onto the steel floor, lost amongst the mesh grating.

'Lieutenant Lownes, you are charged with attempted desertion and possession of heretical weapons!'

'What?'

'This subterfuge, these plans to flee are not warrior's work. You have defamed your body as a machine of the Emperor. The Emperor gives you life and you, in turn, give him yours. This is a warzone and you have sullied yourself with this illicit transaction.' Streck spat the words out in frenzied babble. 'As a champion of the Emperor you betray us all.'

Lownes put himself between Streck and the merchant. 'I am doing what is best for my men, as always.'

'Your men are servants of the Emperor. You're a servant of the Emperor. To possess such weapons is heresy and punishable by death - but to seek to flee a righteous war is to have all honour stripped from your name after death. Your spirit is marred. You can not be remade. Trust in the Emperor, not the embraces of a woman!' Streck raised his pistol.

'Save it, Streck,' Lownes said, somehow calmer now. 'It's not loaded. I removed the clip earlier, when you were unconscious.'

Streck pulled the trigger anyway. Nothing happened.

The two men jumped as one. Streck ejected the empty clip from his pistol onto the ground, grabbing a fresh one from his belt and slamming it into the gun. Simultaneously, Lownes flung the contents of the bag out onto the bed and grabbed an Eldar pistol, pointing it at the Commissar.

'This is lunacy!' the merchant cried, struggling to push herself between the pair, Lownes's arm holding her at bay. 'Look, Commissar, I can fit you on board, no charge. I'll get you out of here before the whole place goes down. It's the deal of a lifetime.'

'Let my men leave, Streck. You'll never hear from us again,' Lownes pleaded.

'You will be sentenced to death,' Streck said through gritted teeth.

'My finger is on the trigger. I will fire as soon as you do.'

'My aim is good.' The Commissar steadied his gun.

'So is mine. Look, this is madness. We can both live.'

'And for each who has turned their back on battle there will be death. For they are dead already.'

'Incoming!' screamed a voice from outside. Metal plating ripped and the ground cracked open as a massive explosion rocked the compound. In the barrack room, however, neither man moved despite the shaking ground.

'Eldar! Here they come!' cried another voice, from out by the gates.

Streck paused for a moment. Lownes stared him straight in the eyes, the merchant woman looking on in terror.

Suddenly one of Lownes's men was at the door. 'Sir, it's the big one. They've breached

the - lieutenant?' Other Jungle Fighters arrived behind him, weaponless and bloodied. Neither Streck nor Lownes moved.

'For they are dead already-' began Streck.

'We have enough time to escape. We're not going to win, Commissar!' Lownes insisted. 'This planet is lost, but we can live - criminals, perhaps, but alive! Come on!'

Streck paused in his litany and regarded Lownes with eyes of steel. 'Oh yes. We could run,' he snarled. 'Then another planet will fall, overrun by alien degenerates intent upon the destruction of humanity. Creatures driven by such a desperate vengeance that they will fight on until every last one of us is destroyed. Unless we remain defiant, fighting on despite this madness. Face the task in hand and make the difference. For each enemy dead in this last stand, it will be one less enemy to be fought in the future. Each man can make a difference: "As weapons for the Emperor and lost to his halls of glory!"' Streck finished, his voice level with unshakeable faith.

Lownes stared at the Commissar's set expression, his mind racing in confusion.

There was a deafening roar and a pressure wave slammed against the barracks, sending men and fittings flying. Plaster and bricks blew into the room, leaving several holes in the wall.

'They're inside the comp-' someone screamed, their voice cut off as a line of shells sliced through the room like a scythe. The merchant woman was thrown backwards into a corner. Picking himself up off the floor, Lownes started to move towards her, but he knew already that she was dead.

He looked at Streck, who had somehow remained standing throughout the bombardment, then down at the Eldar weapon in his hands. He dropped it as if it was diseased, paused for a long moment, then looked back at the Commissar, face set. 'Very well. Let's do it. Let's make a difference. Give me a lasgun.'

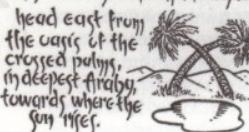
'Thank you, Lieutenant Lownes,' Streck said calmly, handing over a weapon. 'For the Emperor!'

'For the Emperor!'

Moments later, the ragged, lit-up doorway to the barracks was filled with the contrasting silhouettes of the Catachan lieutenant and the Commissar. Then the pair of them dove, guns blazing, into the white hot night. ●

If you have found this please I beg you carry out
those blessings that will put my soul to a final rest, freeing me from
the dread curse that chains my life force even now, as it has already
that of my friends.

I will tell you the source of that evil, a place to which we were lured by greed, and
found only death. Yet still a place in which those without the sense of fear may find riches
undreamt of - if you are such a fool read on and I will aid you with the
knowledge of that which we suffered.



This is the 'land
of the dead', and
all is danger here.
May Sigham Watch
over you.



An oasis lies this way,
overshadowed by a rocky
outcrop shaped like
a cat's head.
Hassan's chains from
the pool - his heart
never took another
heat.

head east from
the oasis of the
crossed palms,
in deepest Araby,
towards where the
sun rises.

continue on for three more
days and nights, then you will
see the ruins of the Nekropolis
of Bhagor. tread warily, for the
King's vassals still guard
their tombs.

The largest tomb
is that of
Btah.



Btah was the most terrible of all the
Kings of Bhagor. His statue stands at the centre
of the north wall - between his legs.
is his wife
Simbol, she
holds a
skull.



The skull is the key to the vaults
within. It is that of Btah's chief
adviser, and even now he guards
his master. To enter beyond you
must place a finger in each socket
and press hard. A door will be
revealed. Take care for his jaws
are strong still, though lost his
fingers to its bite.
The open
door revealed steps and the putrid
odor of decay, dust
or we descended.

Hassan fell foul of the first trap.
A see-sawed floor flipped up, and the
poor wretch plummetted to his death.

The pit was
filled with
sharpened
bone spikes.

The worse still that part of
the floor which swung up
was studded with holes - each
hole held a deadly dart
which flew out
when my soul had pressed on
it before his body hit the ground.
By throwing
cut pouches across
we managed to
weight down the see-saw so that
Sahba could crawl across.



Beware
the sign of
his eye
in this world
Fear clenched
its fist around
our hearts as we continued - then
we heard a sound like the wind over the
clunes hundred of Btah's bat minions
swept down on us their sharp fangs bit
into us, only burning our torches did we
drive them off. Yet too late for Parha,
who by then was a bloodless husk. May his
soul find rest.



We found
refuge in a chamber
decorated at the
whole tomb is in their
accursed symbols.



A stone door faced our own
entrance, yet when opened there was
no further passage — only sand.
the sand poured in nearly swallowing
us all. as this happened a stone slab
dropped down to seal our exit.

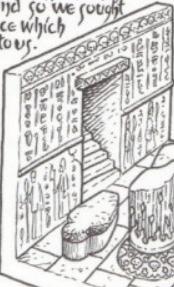
We would all have died, trapped like
camels in sinking sand, only 'tiny'
saved us with Sigmund's cruel blessing.
he'd been stood beneath the slab as it
fell, squeezing past his trapped bulk
we escaped.



We knew the ways of these old
Kings are sly and so we sought
out the entrance which
must be hidden to us.

many of the
symbols were
carved out in
relief, any of
which may reveal
to us its secret.
what we had
looked for we
found in the
form of Sigmund's
staff. When the
headpiece was
pulled out it

releashed a stone panel door.



the concealed entrance opened onto
stairs and from its depths a smell
more foul than any before cloved
the air. descending we came upon
a large vault — the burial
tomb of Btah's household.
I could not prevent my
gorge rising as his servants
arose from unrest to serve
him once more. Worst
of all were those that
had once been his
harem.

by the time we had laid
to rest those that should
never have been awake
only four of us remained.
truly we felt that this was
a place Sigmund could not
see us.

be warned,
the sarcophagi are
already open;
fatbba showed us
mighty spirit fly fast
from this desolate land

a great lintel and
pair of columns
framed a grand
entrance at the
far side of the
vault.

he raised his staff to
confront us. gripped by an
overwhelming fear we fled.
I could feel my bones begin
to ache, flesh rag, hair grey
and fall cut in clumps. I could
see my friends eyes and die
beside me.

now only I remain alive. Btah's
curse has wreaked his vengeance
upon us.

writing this
has greatly weakened
me my teeth have
fallen out to litter
this page and

leave me with
empty gum. I
cannot have much
time left. may Sigmund

protect you.

I hope this last testament
will aid any able to defeat
Btah, all else I can offer is
my hummer taken, the
symbol of Sigmund,
my word of know.

Genther.

AMMUNITION

12 Demolisher shells carried on board

Plasma dynamo charges at 200

therms/second on full revolution

Laser generator capable of full charge

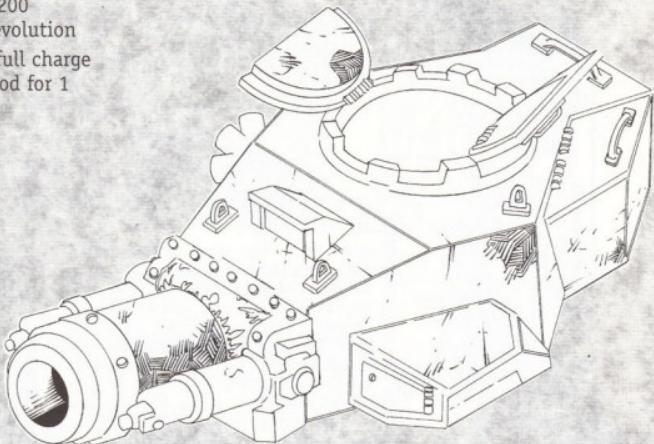
from dead in 2 hours, good for 1
hour of full combat

TARGETTING AND WARNING SYSTEMS

Passive night sight

Laser warning system

Laser range-finder



ARMOUR

Type Conventional steel and ceramic
inserts (combination K)

Thickness Turret - 200 mm

Glacis - sloping to effective 350 mm

LEMAN RUSS

'DEMOLISHER'

SIEGE TANK

CREW

5 (commander, 2 sponson gunners, las cannon operator, driver/comms officer)

WEIGHT

68 tonnes unladen; 72 tonnes with full combat loading

ARMAMENT

Demolisher cannon

Non-stabilised, effective range 1000 m.
Carousel automatic loader; automatic shell ejector system

Plasma guns

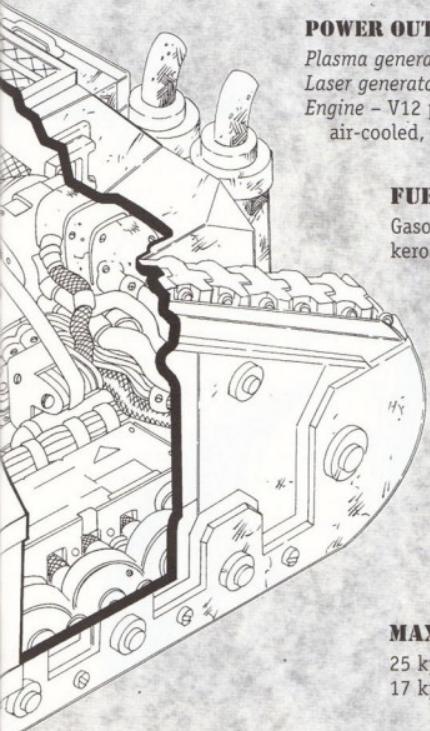
Sponson-mounted, range 1500 m

Las cannon

Hull mounted, stabilised effective up to 2000 m

Smoke/flare launchers

Up to six



POWER OUTPUT

Plasma generator - 4.2 kilotherms

Laser generator - 3.9 megawatts

Engine - V12 piston multi-fuel air-cooled, developing 840 hp

FUEL

Gasoline, benzene, kerosene, other

MAXIMUM SPEED

25 kph (on-road)

17 kph (off-road)

OPERATIONAL RANGE

250 km on-road

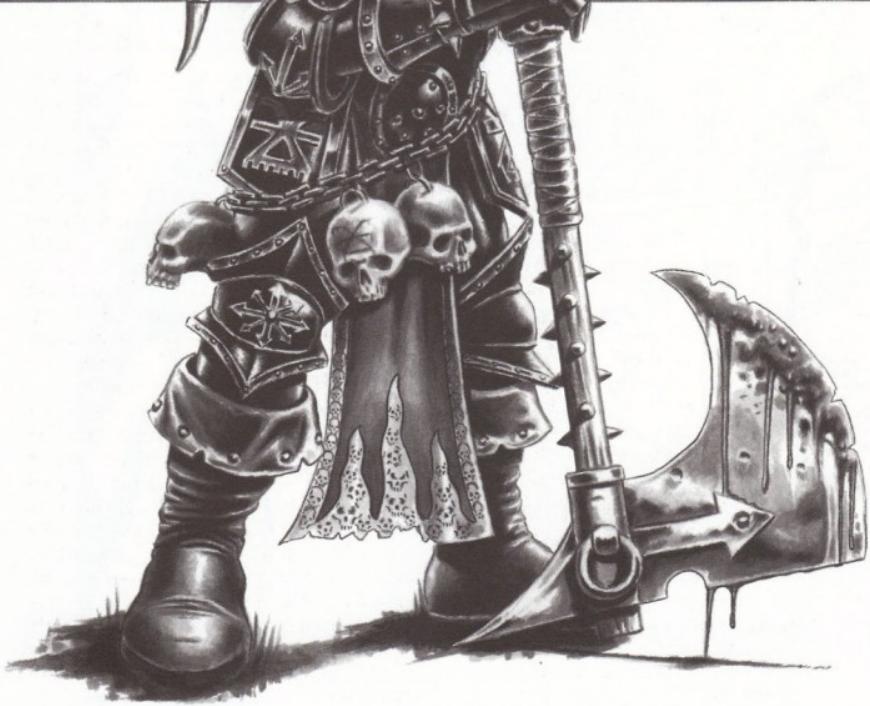
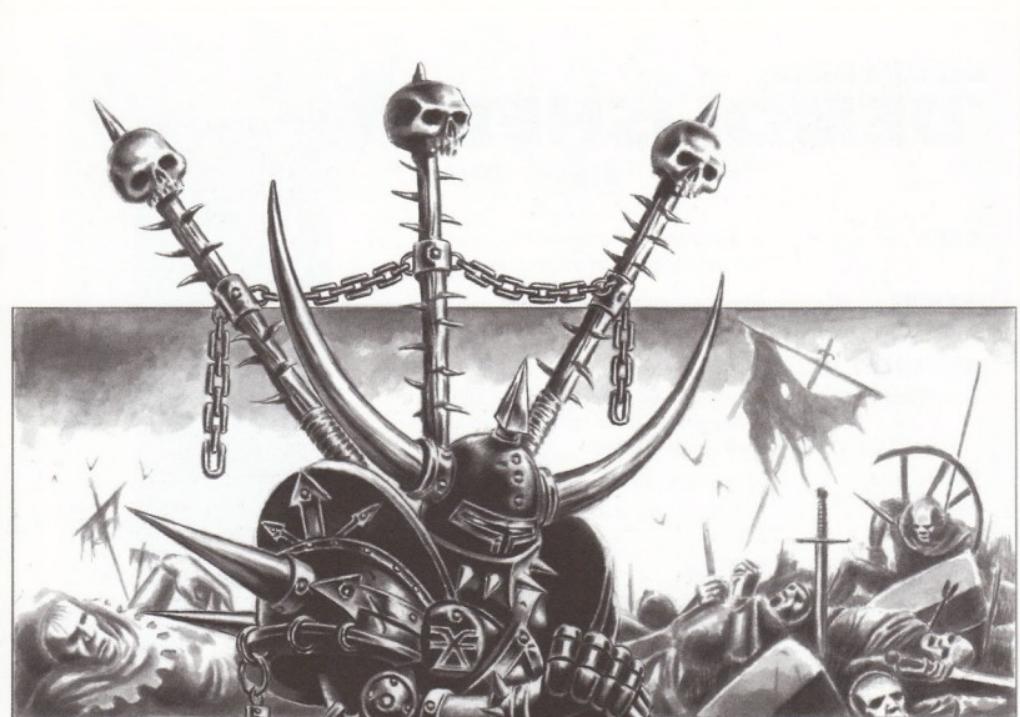
100 km off-road

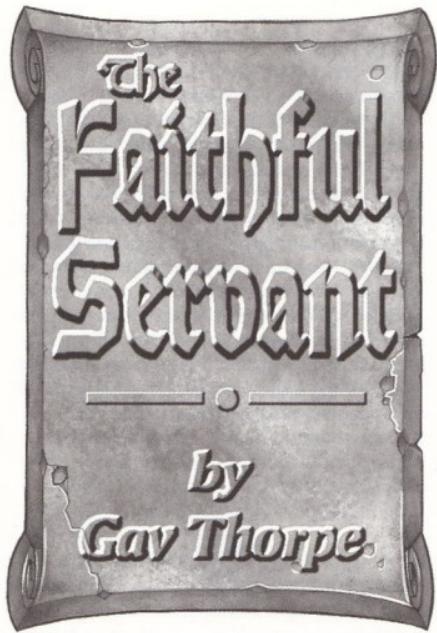
(Optional 100 litre auxiliary tanks giving an extra 100 km range)



— LEMAN RUSS 197 —







THE SKY WAS FILLED with the beating of black wings and the screeches of ravens, crows and buzzards. The odour of decay was strong in the air as the flock circled in the warm thermals that rippled above the burning Kislevite town. Brought from many miles around by the rotting scent of food, the huge black birds circled lower, seeking the source.

Below them, Gorlensk was a scene of carnage and wanton destruction. Many of the buildings were little more than heaps of smoking ash, and all of those that still stood bore signs of the slaughter that had occurred. Bodies were piled haphazardly where clusters of men, women and children had been cut down where they cowered by their psychopathic attackers. However, the flickering flames and billowing smoke deterred the hungry scavengers, until the chill wind brought a much stronger scent of death. The flock moved onwards and downwards, seeking out the larger feast it promised.

The scene outside the town walls was no better than inside. The shadowy shapes of the scavengers skimmed low, using the trail of dismembered bodies to trace a gory path to the main battlefield, a mile or so north of Gorlensk.

The flock's excitement grew as the rotting stench of death grew stronger. Their cries becoming more raucous, the hungry birds scattered into smaller groups that flapped low over the battlefield, each picking out a tasty-looking target. Here the potential banquet would sate the hunger of even this massive flock. The armoured bodies of knights lay next to the gouged and hacked corpses of their steeds. The blocks of infantry had been run down as they fled, and the piles of their carcasses blocked the road and the scattered farmsteads they had tried to defend.

There were more than human bodies littering the field. The feasters of the dead cawed in alarm and avoided the unnatural corpses of Chaos Warriors and half-animal Beastmen which lay heaped by the dozen in some areas, their armour rent by massive blows. The ground was red with drying blood, a crimson testament to the ferocity of the battle. Rats scurried everywhere, their sleek bodies matted with dried gore, as they weaved through the carnage, disturbing lazy clouds of fat, blue flies. The heavy, bloated sun was perhaps an hour from dusk, giving the scene of death and decay an even bloodier cast.

Picking out the pile where the press of corpses was greatest, the birds plunged down amid raucous skrawks and the heavy beating of wings. The bulk of the flock had just settled down to picking at the body of a brilliant white horse and the tangle of bodies around it when something stirred next to them from the midst of the dead. One of the corpses, clad in what was once a white robe now stained with swathes of dried blood, shivered slightly and an arm shot upwards to grip thin air. A plaintive cry wailed across the field, sending the scavengers flapping into the air again.

Markus rose to consciousness with a shriek, awakening from a nightmare filled with hoarse battle cries and blood-chilling screams. His heart hammered on the anvil of his chest, and his breathing was laboured and heavy. His head reeled and a feeling of utter horror swept through him. Not daring to open his eyes for a moment, unsure of what might await him, Markus paused to take a deep breath and fumble the sweat from his brow with his aching arm. His sleeve was ragged and damp, and left a warm smear upon his forehead.

As his stomach settled and his nausea subsided, Markus opened his eyes slowly, terrified that the visions from which he had woken would be true. His attention was immediately drawn to the corpses scattered all around him and he knew that his nightmare was real. The crows had returned and he watched in disgusted fascination as they gnawed at bones and pecked at tender eyes and other soft delicacies. Markus felt his stomach heave at the sight, but as he retched nothing but bile rose up, burning his throat and leaving an acrid taste in his mouth.

Markus turned his head to take in the huge white shape lying alongside him and he groaned aloud. His beautiful warhorse had been a gift from a Captain of the Tzarina's Winged Lancers, given to him in grateful thanks for the many blessings he had bestowed upon the Captain's warriors. The white mare lay still, legs stiff and lifeless eyes open, a gaping, leaking wound in her side providing a feast for a swarm of vermin.

As he tried to rise, Markus whispered to his four-legged companion, though she would never hear his words. 'Farewell, faithful Alayma...' As he sat, pain lanced through Markus's left leg, making him fall back, a startled cry ripped from his lips. The pain brought back a flash of memory.



THE HIDEOUS war cries of the Beastmen surrounded Markus on all sides. A rust-edged halberd blade thrust out of the swirling melee engulfing him and caught a glancing blow on his armoured shoulder. There was a movement in the press, like a wave coming towards him. The swordsmen all around him were being pushed back as an enormous bestial figure, a brutal mace gripped in its clawed hands, strode forward, crazed eyes fixed solely on the priest. Markus raised his hammer in defiance, but his heart quivered as he looked into that monstrous, bull-like face.

Then Alayma took over, his mount more highly trained in war than Markus himself. Rearing high on her back legs, her steel-shod hooves flailed into the Beastman's face, smashing it to a pulp. Twisting slightly as she landed again, the mare bucked, kicking out behind her with her powerful legs to send another mutant foe sprawling to the ground, its chest crushed. Without waiting for guidance the mare turned and leapt through the newly created gap, carrying Markus clear. As he dared a glance over his shoulder, he saw the last of the Imperial swordsmen falling beneath the blades of the Chaos Beastmen and, as he had done, so many times, silently thanked Alayma for saving his life.



MORE GINGERLY this time, Markus managed to raise himself up on his elbows and noticed for the first time the extent of his predicament. In her death throes, Alayma had rolled onto his leg, crushing it beneath her weight. The grim truth slowly dawned on him and he whispered a prayer to Sigmar.

He was all alone on this blighted field of death, trapped beneath the heavy body of the warhorse – and easy prey for whatever creatures the fast-approaching night would bring. The thought that Alayma, who had saved his life, would now be the cause of his death, lay bitterly at the back of Markus's mind. With a sigh of despair, the Priest of Sigmar tried to recall what twists of fate had brought him to such an unlikely end.

It had been a fine spring day when Markus had joined the Emperor's glorious army. For weeks before there had been increasing rumours of a large enemy force marauding through the northern reaches of Kislev. Stories abounded of the depraved Chaos horde, emphasising its merciless butchering and unholy acts of destruction.

Word came through that the Tzarina herself had requested aid of the Emperor,

and shortly after came the messengers of Elector Count von Raukov announcing the mustering of an army. The recruiters came to Stefheim a week later, calling upon all able-bodied men to join in this righteous fight.

Markus had not been drawn in by the well-crafted speeches, drafted to stir men's hearts and make them feel honoured and courageous beyond their normal bounds. However, as he had watched the congregations of his sermons daily swell in size, and noticed the fervent look in his followers' eyes, he felt his own faith in Sigmar strengthening. The sacrifice of the normally peaceful townsfolk and farmers stirred Markus far more than any amount of fiery rhetoric. The humble peasants had looked to Sigmar for guidance and protection, and Markus had felt beholden to help them.

Before the newly-recruited soldiers of the Empire marched off to war in their ill-fitting new uniforms, Markus sent a message to Altdorf notifying his superiors that a replacement would be needed. When the tramp of marching feet reverberated through the hills of Ostland, Markus's tread had sounded with it.



AS SUDDEN MOVEMENT close by made Markus snap out of his reverie. A fat, black rat, well-gorged on flesh and slick with the fluids of corpses, had tugged at his robe and was now attempting to gnaw at his shattered leg. The Priest looked around for some form of weapon, but could find nothing close at hand. Flinging his arms about him, Markus shouted hoarsely.

'Begone! Feast upon the dead. I'm still alive, you vermin!'

Startled, the rat scuttled under the broken neck of Alayma in search of a quieter feast. Seeing his mare's neck so strangely angled brought back another rush of memory to Markus.

DITH A ROUSING blare of horns sounding the attack, the Knights Panther and Tzarina's Winged Lancers charged the vile black-clad horde, spitting hundreds of deformed adversaries on their lances within a few minutes. As the impetus of the knights' charge was spent, the crazed enemy army surged back. A wave of deformed creatures bellowing in bizarre tongues smashed into the Empire and Kislev's finest cavalry and a sprawling melee erupted.

To Markus, things looked grim, as they were assailed from all sides by the demented followers of the Chaos Gods. However, the armour of the knights was holding out and they smashed and thrust at the enemy with their swords or the butts of lances, holding the sudden onslaught.

Then something unimaginably ancient and terrible rose up amongst the ranks of Chaos Warriors and Beastmen. The hideous creation, born of the darkest nightmares, stood thrice the height of a man and bellowed orders in some arcane tongue that did not need to be understood to strike fear into the hearts of all who heard it.

'Blood of Sigmar...' whispered the leader of the halberdiers deployed to Markus's right.

The priest turned in his saddle and scowled at the hoary veteran. 'Watch your tongue, sir! This unholiness has nothing to do with Sigmar, but is the spawn of depraved and mindless enemies.'

The Daemon's massive horns gouged armour apart while its claw-tipped hands wreaked a red swathe through all who tried to stand before it. The almost tangible aura of violence and malevolence that preceded it caused the Knights to retreat rather than face its unnatural vigour and savagery.

Faced with such unholy wrath, the men of the Empire began to give ground. As the monstrosity continued to carve a bloodied path of destruction through the ranks, the retreat turned into a rout and the brave soldiers turned to flee. Markus stood up in his stirrups and tried to rally the desperate men with prayers of courage and steadfastness. He had sworn to Sigmar that he would face these foes, and even if all around him was anarchy he would fight on, alone if he must.

'Hold fast!' he cried. 'As your lord and protector, Sigmar will see you through this carnage!'

It was to no avail and the panicked horde swept around him, embroiling him in a tumult of screams and pressing bodies. As the crying mass of men packed tighter and tighter, Alayma panicked and tried to force a way free, but there was no line of retreat.

Suddenly hands were grabbing at the reins and desperate faces lunged out of the throng, intent on stealing what they thought was the only route to safety – Markus's steed. Gnarled fingers closed around the priest's robes and tugged at him, and he felt himself falling. Markus kicked out at a bearded face and it disappeared into the crowd. He tried one last attempt to restore sanity.

'Hold! Sigmar is with us! These abominations cannot harm us if our faith is strong. Victory to the Empire! Attack!'

Markus's last words were drowned out by an unearthly bellowing and the screams of the dying came ever closer. Over the heads of the Empire soldiers he glimpsed the scaled form of the Daemon Prince. Its massive eyes were pits of darkness and a pile of battered bodies was heaped around it. It was so close now that Markus could smell the fear that crept before it.

A blade caught Alayma and she reared, whinnying. Knocked off balance by the press of fleeing soldiers, she toppled to the ground, crushing men beneath her weight. Markus heard a crackling sound, audible even over the hoarse cries of the panicked mass. He was scrabbling about in the blood-soaked mud when a boot struck his forehead. Darkness descended beneath unseen trampling feet.



WITH A START, Markus realised that the blow that had torn a rent in his horse's side must have come much later, when the victors spilled across the battlefield, hacking and ripping at everything they could find. Sigmar had been merciful and somehow he had

avoided a killing blow while he lay oblivious to the world. At that moment, though, the baying of wolves reverberated across the surrounding hills and Markus corrected himself – he was not safe yet.

A shadow crossed him as something blotted out the setting sun. Turning his head in surprise, the priest saw a bulky figure silhouetted against the western sky, picking its way through the carnage. Markus's throat was too dry to call out but he managed a croak and lifted his arm to wave at the approaching figure, silhouetted against the deep red glare.

'Over here, friend!' he called. 'Thank Sigmar, I thought none alive but myself.'

The man turned abruptly and strode towards Markus. However, far from relaxing, the priest tensed as the figure came closer. He walked directly towards Markus with a determined stride that unnerved the priest. Markus thought that anyone wandering this blighted place would surely be wary of more Chaos followers lurking nearby.

As the shadowy figure came closer, the priest could pick out more details. The man was clad in thick armour and a horned helmet, and all about him were hung dire symbols of power, sigils of the Chaos Gods proclaiming his status and allegiances. Otherworldly runes were engraved into the black enamelled chest-plate, inscriptions of protection and power that writhed with their own energy, written in a language no normal mortal could speak. It was plain the newcomer was no saviour.

Markus's heart fluttered and he struggled frantically to pull himself clear from Alayma's heavy corpse. Pain lanced through Markus's leg again and he collapsed on his back, whimpering despite himself.

Muttering entreaties to Sigmar, Markus tried to calm his ragged breathing and studied the approaching figure, who was just ten strides from him. He tried to speak, but his throat, dry with fear, just made a cracked, croaking noise. The Chaos Warrior now stood perhaps three paces away, not moving at all. Dark eyes glittered inside the helm's strangely shaped visor, staring at the priest with unblinking intensity.

As his own eyes took in the immense scabbard hanging at the warrior's waist,

Markus recoiled in fear, expecting a deathblow to come swinging down with every thunderous beat of his heart.

Markus flinched when the Chaos Warrior reached up with a gauntlet-covered hand, but the death blow did not fall. The stranger gripped the single horn protruding from the forehead of his helmet, then wrenched the helm free and let it drop to the ground.

Markus blinked in disbelief. The man in the bizarre armour was startlingly normal. His chin and nose possessed an aristocratic line, his dark eyes more amused than menacing without the confinement of the helmet's visor. The warrior looked straight into Markus's eyes and smiled. An icy shiver of fear ran through the priest. That seemingly benign expression terrified him more than the slaughter that had occurred earlier, or even the horrifying carnage wrought by the Daemon Prince.

The terror he felt was wholly unjustified and unnatural, and his spine tingled with agonising horror, though Markus could not fathom why the warrior was so frightening. This was no vile Daemon from the *Liber Malificorum*, but a normal man. For some reason, this just increased Markus's panic and his whole body trembled with every shallow breath he managed to gasp.

When the Chaos Warrior spoke, he found himself listening carefully and – despite the awful predicament he was in – trying to place the man's accent. He thought it might be from the Reikland, but the intonation and phrasing of the stranger's words seemed slightly mispronounced and somehow archaic.

'Are you afeared?' the sinister figure began. 'Does your blood coldly run with the sight of myself?'

Markus swallowed hard, and tried to look as defiant as possible. 'You don't scare me, foul lapdog of evil! My master protects me from the ravages of your desperate gods.'

The Chaos Warrior laughed, a deep, disturbing sound. 'But of course you must have divine protection.' He looked around himself extravagantly. 'Amongst this slaughter you alone lie alive and breathing, spared the fate ordained for your countrymen. However, could it not be that

someone other than your master has stayed the hands of your attackers?' The Chaos Warrior lowered one knee into the crimson-stained earth and leaned forward to whisper in Markus's ear. 'Is your master so strong he could hide your presence from the gaze of the Lords of Chaos?'

This time it was Markus who laughed coldly, shaking his head in disbelief. 'Sigmar watches over his faithful followers; he loves them now as he loved them in life. Of course it is Sigmar who has spared me from death. My soul is pure. Your loathsome Gods have no hold on me.'

The warrior laughed in mockery and stood up, wiping the filth from his armour with a rag torn from a corpse's jerkin. Markus ignored the disbelieving look directed at him.

'Sigmar provides my life and soul with every contentment they desire,' he spluttered bravely. 'There is nothing I want from your dark masters.'

The stranger moved across to Alayma's corpse, kicking at the rats that scurried underfoot. With a sweeping gesture, the Chaos Warrior unhooked his dark blue cloak and laid it across the wide curve of the dead horse's body. After smoothing out a few creases, he sat down on the carcass, causing it to shift slightly and send more pain roaring along Markus's leg. The priest gasped. When his tear-misted eyes focused on the warrior once more, the strangely armoured man was still staring straight at Markus, with the same amused, almost playful look in his eyes, his mouth twisted in a slightly crooked smile.

'Did that hurt?' he said in a low voice. 'Or did mighty Sigmar prevent your mind exploding with agony for a moment? They say pain focuses one's mind. In my long experience, however, I have found pain to be a constant distraction, whether in the suffering or the infliction. You say your soul is pure – yet you have had doubts, no?'

Markus shifted uneasily, trying not to move his leg. As he looked away from the warrior's constant stare, the man laughed shortly, an unpleasant noise like the yap of a small dog.

'Was it pain or guilt that averted your gaze from mine?' the Chaos Warrior continued smoothly. 'I once heard a philosopher say that life was a constant

series of questions, with each answer merely leading to more questions, and only death provided the final answer to which there were no more questions.' The warrior paused and his brow briefly knitted in thought.

'Jacques Vieraux of Brionnes, I think.' He waved a dismissive hand. 'It doesn't matter. I have many such questions, and I expect you have even more. Shall we live a little, and exchange our questions for yet a little more of life? How come you here, Sir Priest? You are ageing. Nearing forty? Why would a slightly overweight, peaceful priest be found lying as a casualty on this forsaken field? What brought you forth from your shiny temple?'

Markus was confused; the stranger's words were baffling his pain-numbed mind. Gritting his teeth, he felt compelled to ask the questions burning in his mind. 'Just who are you, foul-spawned deviant? Why not kill me now? What do you want with me?'

The warrior's eyes almost glowed with triumph, the setting sun reflected in those dark orbs. 'Now you see! Questions and answers, answers and questions! This is life!' The warrior laughed again, slapping his hands on his knees. He calmed himself and his face took on a veneer of sincerity. 'I am called Estebar. My followers know me as the Master of Slaughter, and I have a Dark Name which you would not be able to pronounce, so "Estebar" will suffice.'

'As for my being here? I have come for your soul!'



LORD SIGMAR, Father of the Empire, Shield of Mankind, protect me from evil...' That chilling horror Markus had felt when first seeing Estebar returned with even greater strength and he whispered a prayer to Sigmar, asking for guidance again and again.

As the desperate litany spilled from the priest's lips, the warrior bent closer, his voice a savage whisper.

'Your god will not hear you.' His arm swept back, taking in the expansion of death and destruction that spread for miles in every direction. 'Around this battlefield, my masters laugh and scream in triumph. The Chaos Gods' power is strong here and your prayers will go unanswered. If you want salvation, you had best ask for it of other entities than your weak lord.'

Markus tried to spit in disgust, but the thin dribble of saliva merely dripped down his chin, making him feel foolish rather than defiant. 'I would rather be torn apart by wild creatures than to ask your insane gods for aid. If that is the best you have to offer, I think my soul is very safe. Just strike me down now, and stop wasting my time!'

'Strike you down? As you wish!'

Estebar stood up abruptly, unsheathing his sword and holding it high in one clean motion. Markus flinched involuntarily and shrank back from its glowing blade. The Chaos Warrior appeared to be scowling and his dark eyes burned intensely.

'See, you still want life!' Estebar sighed as he lowered the sword slowly, then slid it back carefully into its black sheath. 'You have not the conviction you would like to believe you possess. I would not strike you down, you who I barely know and yet who intrigues me so much.' He shook his head and fixed Markus with a twisted grin. 'Your faith is uncertain, so what makes you think you really have Sigmar's protection?'

'My faith is certain; be sure of that, hellspawn!'

Markus surprised himself with the vehemence of his words. The priest wanted this strange conversation to end. This was not the threat of Chaos he had been brought up, and then taught, to fight. How could one fight an enemy who tried to defeat you with words alone, spoken by a voice which seemed to hover inside one's very mind. Markus did not want to answer Estebar's inquiry, but the Chaos Warrior's voice seemed to reach into his head and pull the answers from his lips.

'Sigmar has saved me before,' Markus started before he knew what he was saying, his eyes glinting with defiance. Estebar looked at him quizzically, one eyebrow raised. That one simple gesture seemed to have a world of meaning and Markus felt a

tug at his consciousness, pulling the story from the depths of his memory.

'I grew up in a small village near to the World's Edge Mountains. I was the son of a miller and fully believed that I would continue running the mill after he was dead or retired.' Markus's eyes were drawn to Estebar's. Those midnight orbs were like a bottomless gulf, pulling everything into them, sucking Markus ever deeper. The words came tumbling from the priest's mouth, despair overwhelming his heavy heart.

'Then one day, in the spring, the Beastmen came. They attacked without warning: the militia had no time to assemble. I saw my father and younger brother cut down by their wicked blades, and I watched as they chased my mother and sister into the foothills. I had been delivering our monthly tithe of flour, four half-sacks of the finest, to the shrine of Sigmar when they stormed out of the dark forests. They did not enter the shrine – they couldn't, it was too holy a place for their kind – but they had other plans. They were clever; they brought torches and stole oil from the store house and set light to the chapel while we were still inside.'

Markus's voice cracked and tears welled up in his eyes at the memory. The other man's black orbs continued to stare intently, as if sucking the information out of Markus. Wiping the tears from his bloodstained cheeks, the priest felt compelled to continue.

'The old priest, Franko, soon fell to the smoke and fumes and I hid in the crypt. The smoke and flames followed me, though, and I thought I was trapped and would certainly die. Even if I could get past the flames the Beastmen would cut me down as soon as they saw me. Then another's voice was in my head, talking to me. It was Sigmar, you see,' Markus insisted, 'guiding me, directing me, telling me an escape route. One of the tombs was false; pressing a hidden lever I opened the secret doorway within and stumbled down a long tunnel which took me away from the village.'

Estebar's face was a blank mask, but the priest pressed on in eager confession. 'When I hit the open air again I ran and ran, and almost died of exhaustion before

I came to the Count's castle. He sent an army of his men to harry the foul raiders while his daughter tended to my health. She was sweet and I would have loved her... had I not heard another's calling even stronger.'

Markus remembered that feeling, of salvation from the flames, and how his own faith had been fanned from a flickering spark into the raging fire of belief. Looking at Estebar he felt his fears subsiding.

'From that day on I swore I would return Sigmar's grace. I took up the robe and hammer in his name. That is the root of my faith and though I may flinch at your blows, it is still strong enough to thwart your masters.'



MARKUS STARED at the Chaos Warrior, the defiance rekindled in his eyes, expecting some petty retort that would seek to belittle his convictions again. None came. Estebar sat looking thoughtful for a moment, his hand toying absently with the sculpted pommel of his sword. The warrior looked around him again at the carnage, then cocked his head to one side a moment before the howl of wolves, closer this time, echoed through the heavy air. He looked to the west and frowned.

'Sundown is nearly upon us, and the time is fast approaching. Shall I tell you of saviours and debts? Of divine deliverance and holy missions?

As he saw the longing in the Chaos Warrior's eyes, Markus's lips formed a sneer. 'I do not need to hear your tale of treachery and weakness. You are less than nothing to me!'

Estebar waved dismissively, as if Markus was little more than an irritating insect, and sighed. 'Whatever.' He looked up at the rapidly darkening sky, his memory lost in a dim, distant time.

'My faith started much younger than yours, and I had not the choice you were offered. I was the eldest son of a wealthy

merchant family in Nuln. I had a good education, lots of friends and powerful allies, and all this before I had seen fifteen summers! Life was good – probably too good, my later experiences have taught me. Chaos was the bane of my family too. I can see why you were brought to me now; we have at least that much in common. Behind the strong walls of Nuln we were safe from marauding Beastmen, but another peril, one much more loathsome and insidious, awaited us.'

The Chaos Warrior's dark eyes were sad, though a faint glimmer of a smile played about his lips for a moment and then faded. He sat down on Alayma again, more gently this time, and stared at the ground. Absentmindedly, he began to pull off his heavy gauntlets.

A cult, dedicated to the Lord of Pleasure, enticed us into a trap. For all we knew, it was just another magnificent party, another event in a busy social calendar. However, they locked the doors after we had entered, and then the sacrifices began. I will not say what perverse fascinations went on there, for it would take too long and I have no wish to be found alone on this field when the stalkers of the night come running. However, let me say simply that one by one the guests were sacrificed to Slaanesh, until only a few of us, the youngest, remained. Obviously we were highly prized. Fate had other plans for me, though, and when the Reiksguard broke down the doors and smashed through the windows I thought I was saved. They slew the cultists and freed us, but I was never truly free again.'

The Chaos Warrior fell silent for a moment, his gaze fixed on the withered, blood-soaked grass between his boots. Then he gave Markus a crooked smile.

'Slaanesh, Prince of Chaos, had already caught my soul without even asking for it! The warpstone incense burnt during the long ceremony took a grip on me. Slowly at first, I remember, my senses grew more powerful. I could see minute details on plants and animals, I could hear the whispers of my neighbours like the thunderclaps of a storm and the feel of the silken clothes in my wardrobe against my skin approached ecstasy.' Estebar stroked a hand through dead Alayma's flowing mane

and shuddered, his lip quivering and his eyes rolled up for a moment. Then he snatched his hand back, as if taking control of himself, and his eyes narrowed dangerously.

Markus could see that the memories were not as pleasant as Estebar would like him to believe. Who could tell how much the young man had endured, half-possessed by an ancient, evil god, forced to follow the ways of darkness. Perhaps, Markus considered, Estebar was longing for an end to his curse. Mind whirling, the priest started formulating a plan that would save them both from damnation.

'There is no need for this agony to continue. Come with me and I will teach you the old path of Faith. You will learn again what it means to have your freedom,' he insisted.

Estebar did not seem to hear or want to listen; he was wholly wrapped up in his own past. Regaining his composure, he carried on with his tale.

'That was not all. My mind expanded also, giving me a prescience, a foresight into the future. Combined with everything else, my life was full of pleasure. I endured the moment to every extent and could see the later pleasures that would follow at the same time. I wasted these skills at first, taking pleasure in women and feasting and drinking. I used my foresight to amass a fortune at the gambling tables.

'When the rich society had been exhausted, a conquest of perhaps seven or eight years, I looked to lower quarters for my entertainment. Slaanesh had me in its grip and every night for years I frequented the dockside taverns, challenging death with cut-throats and other scum for the sheer excitement and rush of blood.' The Chaos Warrior sighed again.

'Then suddenly I was bored again. A wanderlust filled me, and I travelled wide, revelling in every new experience; a night under the stars, the feel of a hearty farmhouse daughter, the taste of exotic foods. Slowly, but with a subtle determination, I made my way northwards, through Kislev, and a few elegant dances at the Tzarina's court, up into the Troll country, ever onwards to the realm of the Lost and the Damned. I was Slaanesh's pawn and loved it. I travelled

those nightmare regions until I stood before the Great Gate itself and begged Slaanesh to allow me to enter into the beautiful paradise that lies beyond.' Estebar looked up, his face made of steel. 'I was flung back far, scorned and ridiculed for my impudence. Entrance into that plane was not to be given lightly. I would have to buy my way in.'

Markus was shocked. The implication of the other's words were clear. 'You seek no redemption, you truly are happy in your chains. You are a greater fool than I realised to be held by such a weak lure. The only eternity worthwhile to strive for is in the embrace of Sigmar, not some unholy hell forged from a mad god's whims!' Then another realisation dawned on Markus and he eyed Estebar with renewed suspicion.

'Souls. You must pay a number of souls to the Gods before they let you cross over, isn't that it?'

Estebar laughed loudly and for a long time. With an enthusiastic grin he nodded. 'Yes, yes! My dear Markus – but of course I know your name; how sharply your wits are honed!' The Chaos Warrior smiled benevolently. 'But not any souls. Oh no, that would be far too easy. The souls I have claimed for Chaos, for I forswore Slaanesh as my sole patron, have been men of high standing, strong of courage and moral fibre like yourself.'

Markus was shocked. 'How can anybody willingly give themselves to Chaos? Even you are not guilty of that stupidity!'

Then another thought occurred to him: they hadn't gone willingly at all, they had been used and perverted by the same subtle power that Estebar was using on him right now. In the twilight, the Chaos lord seemed to swell. An aura played about his body, spilling through the air like a vapour. As Estebar spoke, Markus fancied he could feel the insubstantial tendrils of that vile aura reaching out to wrap around him too.

'Lord Sigmar, Father of the Empire, Shield of Mankind, protect me from evil...'

Estebar seemed to grow angry, his face twisted in a sneer, eyes boring deep into Markus's head. 'You *will* be my last soul! You *will* be mine! Guided by the Lord Tzeentch, I have slaughtered thousands

just to bring you here. My precognition has waxed powerful over the years and I saw this day long ago. It is the day of my ultimate triumph. I could kill you now, swifter than a blink of your clouded eye, but only you can vouch your soul to my cause. Your soul will be given over to my lordly masters. As you take my place and serve them in this world, I, Estebar, the Master of Slaughter, bringer of despair to a hundred towns, will ascend to the glories of the Otherworld. It is written in my destiny. It will be so!'



E STEBAR RELAXED his hands, which had been gripped in fists so tight a trickle of blood dripped from his palms where his nails had dug deep into the flesh. Taking a deep breath, the Chaos Warrior calmed himself.

'And yet, at the last, you still have a choice. Renounce your faith in Sigmar and I will depart to greater glories. Without me at its head, my army will fragment and scatter and the Empire will be safe. If you defy me, I will burn, torture and defile every man, woman and child between here and Altdorf searching for another who will fall before my grace.' He sighed. 'There is no point resisting, I *will* have another soul, so make it yours and you can save thousands of lives, end the torment and suffering and earn your own salvation. Just a simple nod or word is all I need.'

'What does it feel like to be the saviour of the Empire, Markus?'

'Lord Sigmar, Father of the Empire, Shield of Mankind, protect me from evil...' the priest groaned.

Markus's prayers brought no solace. The fiend's subtle words were playing tricks with his mind. The bargain sounded so simple, and he did not doubt the truth of Estebar's pledge. Markus was confused, his mind travelling in circles. How could he tell if it was truly Sigmar who had saved him from the fire in the chapel? Could it have been the twisted Chaos Gods who

had freed him so many years ago simply so that he would be here now? No doubt the plans of the Dark Ones were bold and only the test of time would see their fruition. Plans within plans, wheels within wheels spun in Markus's terrified mind. Summoning his mental strength he spat out his defiance, wrenching each word from the depths of his soul.

'I will... not... betray... my... lord!'

Estebar spoke again, his voice at its most subtle, sliding into Markus's consciousness and leaving its indelible mark. 'Thousands will live or die by your choice, yourself included. Whether you listen to your heart or your head, you have no real choice. Perhaps one day you will come to join me in Dark Paradise.'

Doubt crept into Markus's mind like an assassin. Perhaps he could claim his abandonment of Sigmar and thus save the Empire from the ravages of this madman, but in his heart remain true to his faith. Maybe Sigmar *had* been his saviour, for the very same reason that he alone could avert this catastrophe. Either way, the priest's past life took on a whole new meaning and many mysteries were now explained to him.

But what if that was but the first chink in the armour of his faith? Could he truly lie about what he believed? Was this the same path trodden by Estebar's past victims, believing themselves safe until they realised that they had lied one time too many and they were now damned? Could faith ever be feigned and would Estebar realise Markus's lack of sincerity?

As Markus wracked his brains for the right answer, the agonised yowling of some forest creature's final moments sounded across the darkness, followed by a series of monstrous roars. Estebar stood up and gazed towards the forest in the distance, pulling on his gloves.

'Make your choice quickly, priest. Other creatures more fell than wolves stalk this night. That is the cry of Khorne's hunters, the Flesh Hounds. I will make the choice simple for you. Even if you could free yourself you might not escape the swift chase of those daemon stalkers. You must have a symbol of your new allegiance to protect you from their ripping claws and savage jaws.'

Estebar stood and drew his sword from its scabbard once again. Startled, Markus was transfixed by the ill-forged blade. It was of the blackest metal, inscribed with golden runes that writhed under his gaze. For a brief moment, though, Markus could understand them; he could decipher the dire spells of cleaving and maiming that they embodied. The moment passed and they turned into evil but nonsensical sigils once again. Estebar thrust the sword blade down into the ground a foot to Markus's right, within easy reach. He plucked his cloak off the cold body of Markus's horse.

'Cut yourself free, priest, and you and thousands of your countrymen will live. Fulfil your destiny and take up the sword! Do not deny this; it has been written in fate since the stars were formed and the cursed sun first burned. Now I will leave you with your thoughts. Don't take too long or the choice will be made for you.'

With a bow of his head and one last regarding look, Estebar fastened his cloak again and strode away into the looming darkness of the early night.

For a long time Markus did not move, but lay with his eyes closed and listened to his own ragged breathing. There was no one else to convince but himself and he could not lie to his own heart, even if his head could be betrayed. Could he wield that twisted blade at all, even to cut himself free and still remain faithful to Sigmar? There was no guarantee that the sword would let him wield it without first swearing his allegiance to Chaos. There were tales of holy weapons that would burn the hands of the impure if they held them. Perhaps similar unholy weapons existed to test the faith of the impure. Markus was lost inside his own arguments.

A howl split the silence, and Markus imagined he could feel the padding of many huge clawed feet across the ground. The sound of bestial panting came out of the darkness. Markus opened his eyes.

The moon of Morrslieb, harbinger of Chaos, was rising over the night-shrouded forest. Silhouetted against that baneful orb was the grip of Estebar's sword. In the unearthly green glow of the Chaos moon, it looked to Markus for all the world like a hand reaching out to take him into the darkness. ●



PERCY MELBYE 97.

OBVIOUS TACTICS!

Episode Three

ANOTHER
HILL OF DEAD
HAS BEEN
RAISED.

THE RED
THIRST HAS
SERVED ME
WELL.

SCRIPT & ART DAVE PUGH

HAVE YOU
SLAKED
YOUR THIRST,
BROTHER
SERGEANT?

OR WILL YOU
TURN YOUR
BLADE
ON ME?

COME,
LIBRARIAN,
THERE WILL BE
MORE BLOOD TO
SPILL IN THE
DEEP HALLS.

NO, YOUR
BLOOD SPILLS
HERE!

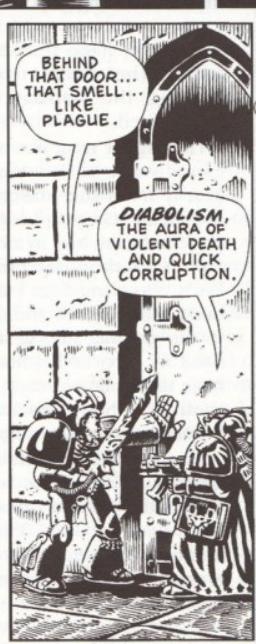
WHA....?

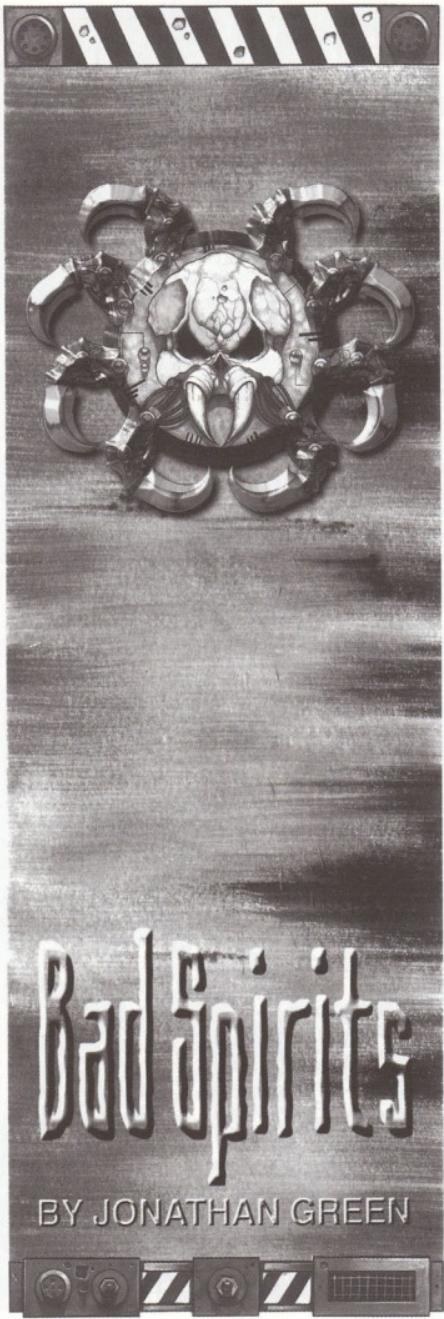
GODS!

WHAT
DEVILRY
IS THIS?

IT APPEARS
WE HAVE AN
ALLY IN THE
SHADOWS.







PANIC REIGNED in the Ratskin camp. The great claw swept down again, this time decapitating an old Ratskin with a sickening crunch of shattering vertebrae. In the flickering light of the campfire, Grey Spider watched the slaughter in horror. Here he saw the corpse of a squaw, still clutching a mewling infant in her arms. There an elder coughed and breathed his last as his precious life-blood poured from a gaping wound in his frail chest. And there, silhouetted against the fire in the darkness of the Underhive, was the mountainous outline of the beast. Only the tribe's totem pole towered above it. Grey Spider pumped the barrel of the shotgun and raised it to his shoulder. Now he had the monster in his sights.

Hearing the double click, the beast turned its misshapen head and fixed Grey Spider with its fiery gaze. The Ratskin felt the sick chill of fear creep down his spine and seize his stomach in its contorting grip. He found his gun sights wavering – he was shaking. Taking one hand from the shotgun he wiped the sweat from his brow. Roaring, the monster charged. Grey Spider fired.

The report rang out across the vast, empty waste of the dome and echoed faintly from the plascrete ceiling far overhead. Grey Spider felt the wind punched from him in a rush of air as an iron-hard shoulder rammed into his body, carrying him backwards. The beast slid to a halt and Grey Spider fell to the ground, his chest heaving as he tried to recover his breath. He could hear the beast snorting in great gulps itself as its body was seized by a rage-induced adrenaline surge.

The Ratskin still had the shotgun gripped firmly in one hand. Struggling against the pain he primed the weapon for a second time. This was like no other Underhive creature the tribe had ever encountered. It seemed impervious to weapons and had no understanding of compassion. Why was it attacking their camp? In their search for new hunting grounds had the tribe angered the inscrutable spirits of the Hive?

If only the hunting party had returned that night as had been expected. If only more of the menfolk had stayed behind to protect the camp. But if he and his Braves could not hold off this monster, then who was to say that all the Ratskin warriors of the Redsnake Tribe would make any difference. If he was to die that night he would die fighting and with honour, as a Ratskin warrior!

The monster charged for the last time. Grey Spider pulled the trigger but still the monster would not stop. The great gleaming claw descended and Grey Spider's world exploded into darkness.

The settlement burned.



TWAS UNDERHIVERS, I tell you!' Quaking Dome bellowed, shaking his skull-headed staff in fury. As he screamed his anger, the shaman's face turned red beneath the sacred spirals painted on his cheeks.

'Try to be calm, my brothers,' the old Chief pleaded, his age-lined brow furrowed in distress. The hunting had not been good, the Giant Rats had slunk off to nest deeper in the Hive Bottom this season, and now the warriors had returned to find their families slaughtered. Chief Thunderslag felt powerless in the face of his warriors' grief. Nothing he could say would take away their pain. He could only try to keep them from doing something they would all regret. 'We have always lived on fairly good terms with the hivers.'

'What've they ever done for us?' It was one of the more rebellious braves who spoke, having found his courage at the bottom of a bottle of Second Best.

'How can you say that, Howling Vent? They have traded with us, buying the skins we hunt for, and our blindsnake pouches. In exchange we have received weapons,' Chief Thunderslag eyed the bottle gripped in the brave's hand with contempt, 'and that poison you guzzle so much!'

'You call it trade?' Quaking Dome exclaimed. There was no stopping the shaman now. 'It's nothing more than exploitation! The invaders have never respected the sanctity of our lands and now they've shown their true intentions! He was physically shaking, the bones strung onto his ceremonial armour rattling with every convulsion. 'While we were away providing for our families, they murdered them all to drive us from our homes - so they can steal our territory!'

The shaman's tirade was greeted with a chorus of agreement. Many had sought solace in alcohol since making the gruesome discovery on their return. The shock of what they had found in the cold, oxyacetylene haze of morning had been too much for even these hardened warriors to cope with.

'Stop, stop now!' the despairing Chief commanded. 'It is not the hivers who have done this. The spirits have been disturbed and become restless. We must find out why and discover who, or what, has done this. We owe it to the souls of our departed loved ones!'

'You don't know what you are talking about! You are getting old! Your words mean nothing to these people,' Quaking Dome hissed, turning on the ageing Chief, his voice full of contempt. Dark eyes flashed in righteous anger. 'Words cannot bring back the dead. Actions are all that can appease their own troubled souls! We must put on war paint and prepare to die taking hiver scalps! It is the Ratskin way!'

With that, the shaman turned on his heels and strode out of the camp. 'He who would avenge those who have been slaughtered here follow me!' he shouted back over his shoulder. The rest of the grief-stricken hunting party, high on Second Best, trailed after him.

Chief Thunderslag stood alone by the tribe's totem pole, watching the Ratskin warriors disappear from view as they were swallowed up by the blackness of the Underhive.

'You will be renegade if you choose the war-path!' he shouted forlornly after them. 'You will no longer be my people! I will not be able to save you this time!' No reply came from the darkness beyond the camp.

Thunderslag turned towards the totem. As so often, his eyes were drawn to the grotesque image carved from plascrete beneath the stylised form of a snarling rat. The thing was almost human in appearance and yet there was something monstrous about it.

'Yes, the spirits of the hive have been disturbed,' he muttered to himself. 'They must be put to rest.' Thunderslag instinctively felt a chill in his bones. Something evil was abroad, he knew. He put an uncertain hand to the autopistol holstered in his rat's-tail belt, hesitated and then withdrew it again. The chief looked to the totem with pleading eyes as if turning to it for help. 'But what can I do?' As Quaking Dome had said, the truth of it was that he was getting old. From the evidence lying all around him, even his native skills might not be enough to help him overcome this beast - if beast it was. Yet there had to be a way.

Abruptly, the old chief nodded to himself and grinned. There was always a way.



GO OLD THUNDERSLAG'S making trouble again? Didn't I always say those Ratskins couldn't be trusted? the toothless bar-prop whistled.

'You sure did, Jemar,' Cooms, his middle-aged and overweight drinking companion, agreed.

'And this was at the Jaygoth's place, you say, Calem?' Jack Finnian, the barman and proprietor of the Last Dregs Saloon asked, taking up his one-armed lean on the bar-top that he reserved for a genuine interest in what his customers were saying.

'That's right,' the grizzled miner confirmed. 'Old man Jaygoth and his wife and all their young 'uns - all dead. Scalped the lot of them!'

'Savages!' Cooms exclaimed, genuinely horrified. 'They can't be allowed to get away with that!'

'There's talk of some folks leaving town already 'cause of the troubles,' Finnian added, nodding knowingly.

'They need to be taught a lesson, that's what they need,' Jemar decided, slapping his hand on the bar. 'Did I ever tell you about the time I came across that band of Ratskins up by Mercury Falls?'

'You did,' Cooms interrupted.

'It's about time somebody did something about them,' Calem said suddenly. 'I would myself, only I'm sure I'm this close to striking a really big adamantite seam.'

'That's what you said the last time,' Cooms muttered under his breath.

'What about the Guilders?' suggested Finnian. 'They should get their Watchmen to sort those Ratskins out once and for all.'

'They're only interested in what happens inside the town,' Calem muttered sourly.

With the scrape of metal on metal, the doors swung open and the Bounty Hunter entered the smoky haze of the Last Dregs Saloon. Silence fell over the saloon, all eyes watching the stranger intently as he strode purposefully over to the bar. The tails of his long leather coat flapped around his knee-length boots. For a moment, the cluster of seals pinned to the inside of his coat that attested to successful jobs were revealed. Everyone in the bar could also clearly see the two, long-barrelled stub guns hanging over the man's hips. He walked tall, his back straight and his steps considered and certain. At the bar, the Bounty Hunter took the smouldering butt of a cheroot from between his teeth and sucked in a long, hissing breath.

'Wild Snake,' he drawled in a voice that was no more than a husky whisper.

'You got it,' the barman replied, hurrying to grab a fresh bottle.

'Hey, mister, you want to kill yourself some Ratskins?' Jemar piped up.

'Nope.'

'What d'you mean?' Jemar exclaimed, in disbelief. 'You're a Bounty Hunter, ain't you?'

'I've already got a job.' The man turned a piercing gaze on the old drinker. In the flickering sodium light, his steely eyes glinted under the shadowy brim of his battered hat.

'Then I would encourage you to finish it and move on, friend,' came a new voice, low and cultured, from the other end of the bar. 'At the moment, Toxic Sump isn't a place where self-respecting gentlemen like ourselves would wish to remain for longer than was strictly necessary.'

The owner of the voice emerged from the smoky gloom. He too wore a long, battered leather coat, beneath which could be glimpsed green trousers. His slender hands were enclosed in thick black gloves; in one he held a drink. He was of medium build, his features angular and well-defined. His carefully-trimmed black beard and moustache were in stark contrast to the Bounty Hunter's four day stubble.

'Why's that?'

'Well, to be quite frank, Toxic Sump is becoming a ghost town.' The bearded man placed his glass carefully on the bar and turned to face the Bounty Hunter. 'The local Ratskin tribe have been causing a lot of trouble recently. They are driving many of the settlers away. Claims are being abandoned throughout the dome; there's no work for anyone anymore.'

'He's right,' Cooms piped up, his companions muttering their agreement.

'So when do you leave?' the Bounty Hunter asked bluntly, fixing the bearded man with a calm gaze as he raised his drink to his lips.

'I am a trader and unfortunately I have a personal financial commitment to fulfil, otherwise I would have departed long ago. When the next Guilder convoy arrives I'll conclude my business here, and when it leaves I intend to be on it.'

The Bounty Hunter downed his drink in one quick mouthful. 'I'm not going anywhere, yet. Like I said, I'm on a job.'

'I was merely looking out for a fellow man's best interests,' the man said with a hint of sighing despondency. 'Let me introduce myself. My name's Cyrus Beckerman.'

'I look after my own interests.' The Bounty Hunter replaced the cheroot between his lips. 'Now if you gentlemen will excuse me.' He turned to go.

With a ringing crash, the saloon doors were flung open and a ragged man burst into the bar. His grimy face was gaunt and

drawn, his hair grey and tangled. His filthy and unhealthy appearance made him look far older than he probably was.

'Quinn? Is everything all right?' Finnian asked in surprise.

'Quick, get me a drink!' the wild-eyed man gasped, slumping down on a stool. 'I need a drink!' The barman didn't need to be told twice. Downing the shot in one go, Quinn slammed the glass back down on the bar. 'Another!' The second went the same way as the first. The grimy character stared directly ahead of him. 'It was terrible, I tell you. I ain't seen nothing like it!'

'What's the matter, man?' pressed Finnian. By now everyone else in the bar was crowding around in concern. The Bounty Hunter paused. He turned back towards the bar but said nothing. His keen eyes took in the blood-stains beneath the dirt and the sodden red patches on the prospector's filthy clothes.

'I was attacked, out on my claim up on Blackash Ridge,' the prospector whimpered. 'I paid my dues. I don't deserve to be treated like this!'

'Blackash Ridge, eh?' Beckerman interjected. 'Let me get you another drink. Wild Snake!' He clicked his fingers and at once Finnian started refilling Quinn's glass.

'There were dozens of them!' the bewildered man went on. 'They were all screaming their war-chants and wearing their horrible rat hides. Their arms were covered in snake tattoos!' The man gratefully accepted the glass handed him by Beckerman.

'Sounds like the Redsnares Tribe,' toothless Jemar offered. 'Didn't I always say—'

'That's them!' Quinn exclaimed, fixing the old man with a wild stare. 'They were mad, gone renegade. Said they were going to scalp me and feed me to the Ripperjacks! They stole my finds and all my gear. I was on to something special up there, a really big strike! Then the monster came and I fled!'

'What monster?' Cooms asked.

'He's mad!' Beckerman scoffed loudly, looking around him. 'The man's obvious delirious.'

'Hear him out!' the barman said forcefully. 'Go on, Quinn, tell us more,' he encouraged. 'What was this monster like?'

'It was like some horror from the Sump, big as a test rig, with blazing eyes and one massive claw!' The prospector paused, sucking in ragged breath.

'And?' Cooms pressed. 'Don't keep us hanging.'

Quinn made no reply. Instead the prospector clutched at his throat and his face started to turn purple. He tried to speak but all that came from his throat was a horrible croaking sound.

'He's choking!' Finnian exclaimed. 'Quick, someone help him!'

Before any of the startled crowd could do anything, Quinn collapsed face first onto the bar with a strangled groan and lay still. The drinkers looked on, dumbstruck. Eventually Calem reached over to the prospector and felt cautiously for a pulse on the man's neck. 'He's dead!' the miner announced, in bewildered surprise.

'I guess it was all too much for him,' Finnian suggested, stunned. 'Heart must've burst! Shock'll do that to a man.' He paused, face infused with anger. 'Those Ratskins must have done him over worse than we thought.'

'Well, that's it!' Cooms declared. 'I say we raise a posse right now, go up to Blackash Ridge and lynch old Thunderslag. Send the last women and children to Mercury Falls until it's dealt with. The old snake's gone too far this time!'

'Never mind all that,' Finnian interrupted, pointing at the body slumped over his bar. 'What do we do with him?'

'And what about the monster?' Jemar reminded everyone.

'If there was one!' Beckerman snorted.

'Yeah, but what about Quinn?' Finnian pressed.

'I guess we just lay him out back and let the Guilders deal with it,' Cooms suggested.

The Bounty Hunter eyed the corpse suspiciously. His instincts told him that something wasn't quite adding up. Despite the convictions of the saloon's regulars, the prospector's wounds hadn't seemed to be that serious. And anyway, the man had choked, not bled to death.

Realisation abruptly struck the Bounty Hunter. The last thing Quinn had done before he died was to have a drink. The prospector's glass still stood on the bar. While the others talked, the Bounty Hunter surreptitiously picked it up and, swilling around the dregs left in the bottom, gave it a cautious sniff. A bitter scent assailed his nostrils. He had consumed a fair amount of Wild Snake in his time but the glass smelt strange even for a particularly potent brewing. He thought back: only the barman and Beckerman had handled it. He put the glass back down on the bar and said nothing. Frowning, the Bounty Hunter looked around the room. Beckerman was nowhere to be seen.

'That trader left in an awful hurry,' he drawled.

'He's a busy man,' Cooms grunted over his shoulder by way of explanation.

Finnian was fidgeting nervously behind the bar, unable to keep his hands still. 'Come on, let's take Quinn out back,' he urged. 'Having a corpse in the bar's not good for trade. Makes customers feel uneasy.'

Between them the men picked up the prospector's body. The Bounty Hunter surprised everyone by taking Quinn's feet and helping carry the body out to the back room.

'Gotta show respect for the dead,' he drawled. No one saw him deftly withdraw a scrap of paper from the dead man's boot, secreting it in the long folds of his coat.



TUTSIDE THE Last Gasp Saloon, Nathan Creed, Bounty Hunter, took out the scrap of parchment and unfolded it, grimacing at the stale smell of the dead man's boots. The spidery scrawl and worn lines forming the map were faded with age but their meaning was clear. If the map was genuine – and something in Creed's gut told him that it

was – then it would appear that Toxic Sump's dome was built directly on top of another, much older settlement.

Who knew what ancient treasures lay buried beneath the ash? Creed took the cheroot from his mouth and spat into the dust. The prospector had known. Now he was dead, thanks to the aid of a little poison.

I guess someone else is in on the secret too, the Bounty Hunter thought to himself. Well, Beckerman, or whoever you are, Nathan Creed is involved now so you'd better watch your step.

There was no one else around: Toxic Sump really was turning into a ghost town. Cocking the brim of his hat, Creed let his robo-sight visor scour the rocky outcrop to the west, beyond the barbed-wire topped settlement wall. Beyond the rim lay Blackash Ridge where the dead prospector's claim was situated.

Suddenly he caught the flash of a whiplash coat tail as a bearded figure disappearing around a corner on the other side of the street. Creed grinned. *Guess it wouldn't hurt to do a bit of poking around of my own before I leave town*, he thought to himself. His suspicions aroused, the Bounty Hunter set off.

Making sure he kept well out of sight, Creed followed the man in the coat until the furtive figure stopped outside a long, low building. The barn-like construction stood close to where the town wall had been built, almost on top of the rocky outcrop beyond. Its windows were smeared with grime and the structure gave the impression that it had long been abandoned.

As he unlocked the door, the furtive character glanced around to make sure he hadn't been followed. Back in the shadows, unseen, Creed grinned. It was Beckerman, just as he had suspected. The trader ducked inside the building and closed the door.

Creed darted down a side alley, stopping next to a grimy window. Rubbing the dirt from the panes with his coat sleeve, he peered inside. There was no one about – Beckerman appeared to have vanished – but there was plenty to see nonetheless. The building was crammed full of crates

that, from their condition, had only been packed recently. Their sizes suggested to Creed that whatever was inside was pretty big – and as a result probably quite valuable.

There was something else. At the back of the warehouse the Bounty Hunter could make out a large door, slightly open. 'So that's where you've gone... What exactly are you up to?' Creed muttered. The door's rusty surface suggested that the door had been sealed for some time and only opened again recently.

Creed considered his options. He still had a job to do at Blackash Ridge. He crushed the stub of his cheroot beneath a worn boot heel and strode away. Beckerman could wait.



THE GLOW-GLOBES hanging from the ceiling of the dome were dimming by the time Creed crested the ash-covered rise. Before him lay the prospector's wrecked camp. Broken pipes jutted from piles of rubble, leaking steaming green fluid onto the crumbling masonry. Creed surveyed the devastation emotionlessly. The place was a mess: a cooking pot lay upturned next to the remains of a campfire; the prospector's shelter had been demolished; the seismic equipment the man would have used was missing. The dirt and dust around the site had been churned up; here and there lay a feather or scraps of fur. Ratskins had been here all right, but so had something else – something far more sinister.

Among the countless moccasin prints that covered the site, Creed spotted something unusual: boot marks. The pattern of the boot treads had the precision and regularity of a machine press. They hadn't the look of handmade Ratskin moccasins.

Something else troubled Creed: why would Ratskins steal machinery and seismic gear? His keen eyes scanned the

camp. It was common knowledge that the indigenous tribes of the Underhive worshipped ancient archeotech hoards. They had been known to go on the warpath to recover stolen sacred treasures, but to take modern equipment from a lone prospector? Ratskins had no need of such things. Their knowledge of the treacherous Underhive was unrivalled. There was definitely something strange going on.

It was easy to find where the prospector had been working. Close to a jutting outcrop of rock, a hole had been blasted in the side of the hill. Creed flicked down the photo-visor from beneath the brim of his hat. Peering through the gloom beyond the opening, he could see the pitted walls of a cave and the entrance to a man-made tunnel, shored up with metal props.

Entering the cave, Creed felt a breeze blowing up from the tunnels below. The fetid air testified to the fact that whatever was down there had been there a long time, sealed away with the decomposing effluent that filtered down from the hive-city far above.

The dirt floor of the cave was covered with yet more Ratskin footprints and the same boot marks from the camp, leading both in and out of the tunnel entrance. And there, stamped into the dust, were the footprints of something else too, something much bigger. Creed crouched down to study the prints closer but couldn't identify them at all. They were large and flat, and ended in clawed tips. Claws that had cut deeply into the ground with every step. Maybe there was some truth to the old man's monster story after all. Creed grinned in the darkness.

Getting superstitious, Creed? he thought to himself. Pieces of the puzzle began to lock together in his mind. Dusting himself down, the Bounty Hunter began to rise.

'You're not going anywhere!' hissed a cultured voice. Beckerman!

Creed froze in his crouched position, feeling the cold muzzle of a gun pressed against the back of his neck. He had been so intent on his investigations that he had not heard the softly booted approach. Another footprint explained.

'So it was you,' Creed said calmly. 'I

guess you aren't any kind of trader at all. What's Van Saar's place in all this?'

The man didn't bother to confirm his identity. 'I thought you were on another job,' he snapped, almost in annoyance.

'I'm sure I can make time for you.'

'You have become a... complication.' Beckerman, or whatever the Van Saar's real name was, was about to kill. Creed recognised the signs from long years on the trail of untold killers.

In a fluid motion Creed slid the knife from his boot, the movement concealed by the tails of his coat. Twisting the blade around in his hand he jabbed it backwards. The knife sank deep into the ganger's leg, cutting through his boot, until it scraped against bone.

Beckerman cried out in pain. Dropping his hands to the wound, he gritted his teeth and yanked the blade out of his shin.

It was all the time Creed needed. He sprang forwards, away from the muzzle of the gun and into the tunnel. As he did so, he turned to his enemy. On his feet again, he faced the ganger, a stub gun in each hand.

Depressing both triggers he fired off a couple of rounds, feeling the familiar explosive recoil in his wrists. At the same moment the ganger fired. An instant later Beckerman's body-suit tore apart at the shoulder, leaving a ragged hole – only a flesh wound, but it was enough to ruin his aim. Creed threw himself out of the way as the dust at his feet kicked up in bursts and the shells impacted against the rocky floor.

Lying on his back in the dirt, Creed pushed himself up onto his palms. Through the clearing dust he saw the ganger stumbling backwards, his own weapon dropped on the floor of the cave. Too late, the Bounty Hunter noticed the wires trailing away from the tunnel entrance. Before he could aim his stubbers, the Van Saar fell onto the detonating device. There was a shuddering boom, the roar of shattering rock and the passageway began to shake violently.

The ground quaking beneath his feet, Nathan Creed hurled himself down the tunnel. Behind him the cave mouth collapsed in a jumble of rocks and wreckage. Creed knew only too well that

an uncontrolled explosion in a weakened dome could easily cause hiveweaks. He had no idea how much of the rubble above him might come down at any second, so he kept on running. One thing was for certain: the way back was now blocked by the explosion. There was no going back. Regardless of what lay beyond, in the twisting network of tunnels, that was the way he would have to go.



CREED PAUSED in the semi-darkness. The artificial lighting in this section of the cave system had failed, forcing the Bounty Hunter to peer more closely through his photo-visor. Ahead, to the right, the tunnel opened into a larger cave, possibly the remains of an ancient habitation dome or industrialised area. The passage to the left looked like a dozen others he had wandered along for the last few hours, always leading him deeper towards Hive Bottom. He chose to go right.

He was about halfway across the cavern when he heard an unexpected sound that froze him in his tracks. His hands hovered over the holstered stub guns. It was like the sound he had heard when he had once encountered a nest of Millisaurs. They had been picking at corpses from just another Badzone shoot-out. The sound was unmistakably the tearing of flesh. Ominously, as he listened, the noise ceased.

Moments later, through the gloom Creed was startled as the half-light caught in the jaundiced eyes of some kind of Zombie as it raised its scabrous head to look at him. The creature was half-clothed in filth-encrusted rags, beneath which its diseased skin was visible.

'Plague!' Creed gasped. Everyone knew about what happened to the victims of the neurone plague, but the Bounty Hunter had never been confronted by the results face-to-decomposing face.

The once-human thing hissed through its pock-marked lips. Instantly, the rest of the pack left off devouring the corpses, more interested in the prospect of fresh, tender flesh. Half-rotted muscles dragged the Zombies towards the Bounty Hunter, spittle dripping in long strings from their gaping, moaning mouths. As the foul creatures shambled forward, Creed quickly glanced behind him. As he had feared, out of the corner of his eye he could see yet more Zombies stalking towards him from behind.

Part of him knew he had to save his ammunition for as long as possible. He had no idea where the endless tunnels would lead him or what else he would have to face before he found a way out. If he ever found a way out. But the likely alternative at the moment was the risk of catching the Zombie plague himself. There was nothing else for it. Aiming a stubber at the head of the nearest horror, Creed pulled the trigger.

The Zombie's skull exploded in a shower of blood, bone and brain matter. The walking corpse stumbled on a few feet further before it collapsed, still twitching. This violent display did nothing to stop the advance of the other Zombies. The brain-eating disease had obviously deprived them of both fear and pain.

A second shell tore a hole in the side of another of the advancing Zombies as it slunk forward, a portion of putrefying intestine flopping from the wound. Marshalling his strength, Creed did not run but kept walking at a steady pace. He figured that until the brainless creatures caught the smell of blood it was unlikely that they would charge him. Hopefully the occasional shot would keep off the closest of them and clear a path across the cavern. Whatever, he knew full well that there was no going back now. He could only go on, despite not knowing what lay ahead.

Creed felt time slow to a crawl as the interminable Zombie-shoot played itself out. He reloaded as he walked, always careful to keep a healthy distance between himself and the Zombies. Every instinct screamed at him to run, to put as much distance between the flesh-eating creatures as he could. But Creed resisted

the temptation. The ground underfoot was uneven, with hidden pot-holes and twisted pipes jutting from the ash, ready to trip an unwary fugitive.

A number of the creatures broke off from their laboured pursuit to feed on the carcasses of the Zombies that had already fallen. Creed smiled his fatalistic smile. *Maybe you ugly sons of bitches have no attention span.* He knew he had no option but to keep going. He just hoped that he found a way out of the cave system before he ran out of slugs. Creed walked on through the abyssal twilight.



CREED CROUCHED down behind the crate and allowed himself a deep breath of relief. He had left most of the Zombies behind in the deeper, darker recesses of the cave system as they lost interest and began fighting amongst themselves. After several hours trudging through the underworld, he found himself at one end of a much larger cavern. As he had reached the properly lit passages leading up and out of the depths, the Zombies had seemed unwilling to follow. Maybe they feared something that lay beyond, Creed pondered, something to which they reacted on an instinctive, primal level.

Hearing the sounds of raised voices, Creed peered over the edge of the crate, careful to remain out of view. This cavern stretched out before him for over a hundred metres. Numerous halogen lamps illuminated the chamber, revealing the mouths of distant tunnels leading off into darkness. Twenty metres or so away, a band of maybe a dozen Ratskin warriors were in heated discussion with six members of a Van Saar gang, easily identifiable by their familiar padded green body suits. The two groups were clearly in league with each other.

Hmm... thick as thieves, Creed said to himself. Looks like the old man really was onto something. He scanned the cave for further evidence of his suspicions.

The place was a Guilder's dream. It was full of the most incredible archeotech Creed had ever seen. Bizarre clusters of machinery, dust-covered control panels and chrome-plated artefacts were in the process of being packed into crates... crates like those in Beckerman's warehouse. Creed nodded to himself. *This is bigger than I thought!* It all added up. Creed cursed himself for not piecing the clues together earlier. There was an absolute fortune here. *The credits raised from the sale of this stuff could buy the whole of Toxic Sump, with Mercury Falls thrown in as well,* he thought.

A shout brought his attention back to the discussion taking place in the centre of the cavern. Something was going down: the Ratskins and the gangers were almost coming to blows. Every now and again, the breeze from unseen vents carried wisps of conversation to the Bounty Hunter's ears.

'Not enough Trader tokens, hair face!'

'Not enough Wild Snake!'

'You agreed to the deal.'

'The spirits are disturbed!'

'Crap – nothing but superstitious fear.'

'The totem beast walks!'

'Rubbish.'

'Our ancestors are watching!'

Creed narrowed his eyes: now things were really getting interesting. The gangers had their backs to him. If he could just get a little nearer he might be able to identify the individuals. Keeping low behind the piles of crates, Creed slunk closer. He closed the distance between himself and the gangers without being seen, before ducking down again. Cautiously he peered around the edge of a crate.

Creed felt his coat tail sweep across the screwdriver just a moment too late to stop the object rolling off the top of a tool box and rattling onto the stony floor of the cave. He cursed silently. Gangers and Ratskins all turned in his direction. Creed knew he could not hide now.

'Way too slow!' he drawled as he loosed a fusillade of shots from behind the crate, slamming several rounds into the assembled conspirators. One of the gangers flew backwards as a bullet

shattered several ribs; another screamed as a dum-dum punctured a lung on its passage through his body.

Then Ratskins and Van Saars were returning fire. The chamber echoed with the crack of the tribesmen's muskets and the zinging scream of rounds fired from the gangers' superior weapons. Creed knew he was hopelessly outnumbered, but he was confident that he was by far the better marksman. Despite the dazzling array of targeting devices bolted to the Van Saar's autoguns and bolters, his shots were hitting home. Creed grinned. He liked a good shoot-out. For every ten shots that impacted against the crate behind which he sheltered, one coolly executed shot from him found its target in the form of a renegade Ratskin or a corrupt ganger.

The hail of bullets from a bolt gun tore through the empty crate. 'Durability exceeded,' Creed muttered, and bolted for new cover. He ran, wooden boxes exploding in an eruption of splintering planks behind him. Diving forwards he just avoided a glowing plasma burst as it streaked over his head. The barrel it eventually struck, on the far side of the cavern, contained some volatile substance. Forty metres away, Creed felt the wash from the resulting ball of superheated crimson flame. The cave was lit up momentarily by the inferno.

'What the...?' In the shadows did he catch sight of something big on the move? Then the scorching blast found the Bounty Hunter, and even protected by his thick coat he felt its fierce warmth on his back. Creed wrinkled his nose at the rank smell of singed leather. Somebody screamed.

As he lay face down on the ground, he discarded the spent cartridges from his guns and reloaded. Once these precious rounds had been used up there were only enough bullets left for one more reload.

'Looking tough, girls,' he whispered to the stubbers. 'Looks like you're all but done.' His encounter with the Zombies had cost him dear.

A bestial mechanised roar suddenly rose above the deafening sounds of the firefight. As Creed looked around, the monstrous noise was joined by the agonised howl of what could only be a

dying man. Creed risked a look over the ancient piece of machinery he was hiding behind. To his horror he saw a nightmarish shape. It was fully three and a half metres tall, silhouetted in the bone-white glare of the halogen lamps. The thing lifted a screaming Van Saar into the air by a great curved metal hook. The cruel blade had been thrust through the man's back and was now projecting from his stomach. The hideous monster tossed the dying ganger carelessly aside and ploughed forwards through the mass of men, crushing a petrified Ratskin under one of its great, clawed steel feet.

Now or never! Creed thought, and with his adversaries brutally distracted he made his move. Skirting the edge of the cavern he saw the terrible creature revealed in the glare of the lamps in all its startling glory. Once-human, muscle and bone portions of the creature had been spliced to a droid chassis, so that the creature stomped across the cavern through the carnage on pistonning legs of solid metal. Something about its shape was strangely familiar, but Creed wasn't about to stop for a closer look.

The psychotic cyborg's visage was a grotesque parody of a human face. One bloodshot eye glared out from a head malformed by a serrated, metal jaw. Its bionic, red-glowing counterpart observed everything unblinkingly with electronic intensity. Atrophying tissue around the artificial implants had begun to peel away from the partially metal skull to reveal the corroded circuits of the endo-skeleton beneath.

Creed saw that the beast-machine's naked torso was crossed with livid, purple scars. The huge, steroid-enhanced muscles of its left arm, coursing with telescoping steel cables, supported the weight of a crude three-fingered talon. The claw flexed spasmodically. The right arm was missing entirely. The massive metal contraption in place of the limb began at the shoulder, plasteel-shielded wire bundles connecting with the monster's spinal cord beneath the skin. From its design and the aged condition of its components, Creed was sure that this was no modern day cyborg escaped from

higher up the Hive. How long had it been trapped down here, he wondered, its power cells on standby? Maybe a hivequake had reactivated it. Its program must have been corrupted along with the slow deterioration of its body in the inhospitable conditions in the caves. Now it was loose once more.

The cyborg was proving more than a match for the surprised conspirators. It seemed to be almost totally impervious to their weapons. Cauterised holes in its gore-splattered flesh attested to the fact that both the gangers and Ratskins had hit the creature. However, its armour plating had halted the shells, and seemed to have stopped them from doing any severe damage.

The gangers and Ratskins fought on with increased vigour. This time it was they who felt out-gunned and out-numbered by the sheer might of the rampaging cyborg. Their agonised cries rang in Creed's ears as he ran from the cavern, leaving the carnage behind him.

The Bounty Hunter fled along a large, well-trodden tunnel. Halogen lights illuminated the passage and Creed noticed power cables running along its length towards the world above. Desperate, he followed the sloping path upward, his lungs heaving.

At the mouth of the tunnel, Creed ran into the first and last piece of his puzzle. Wounded shoulder bound up in a temporary bandage, a bearded man was crouched over a small black box. Beckerman was trying to make the final connections between a pair of wires and a small detonator, his lacerated fingers scrabbling. The Van Saar looked up on hearing Creed's approach and a crazed, leering grin parted his lips. A pair of twisted wires ran along the access tunnel in conjunction with the power cables.

'Not this time, Beckerman!' Creed roared, charging the last few paces.

Ignoring the weapons at his belt, the Bounty Hunter lunged forwards, his fatigued muscles fuelled by the adrenaline rush of exasperated desperation. His hands slick with his own blood, Beckerman's fingers slipped on the detonator screws, unable to get a grip. Powering up the

tunnel, Creed reached the entrance and flung himself bodily forward at the ganger before he could make the final twist of the detonation cord.

As Beckerman fell, he grabbed Creed in two strong hands and twisted. Using his own weight and momentum, the Van Saar ganger flung the Bounty Hunter over his shoulder. Creed hit the ground hard, cracking his head on the rocky floor. He lay still, momentarily stunned by the shocking pain. As his vision began to clear, Creed looked up. Death looked back.

Beckerman stood at his feet, a great chunk of plascrete raised above his head. The ganger smiled coldly as he prepared to destroy the Bounty Hunter once and for all. Desperately Creed fumbled for his guns, trying to shake the concussion which all but overcame him.

The Bounty Hunter blinked suddenly as something splashed against his face. Putting a hand to his cheek he felt a warm wetness. His grimy fingertips came away red with blood. He became aware of a horrible gurgling noise and through the fog of pain he looked up at his would-be killer. Beckerman's feet were hardly touching the ground as his body hung in the air, convulsing, a great, metallic claw thrust through his chest. With a growl like iron scraping on iron, the cyborg took hold of the ganger's head with its vice-like claw. With one savage tug, the man-machine tore Beckerman's head from his shoulders.

In seconds Creed was on his feet, all pain forgotten. He had only one chance. In a supreme effort of willpower he ran towards the monster.

'Chew on this, clawfinger!' he rasped, raising his guns. Both stub guns blasted the last of their precious cargo at the insane cyborg at point blank range. The sound in the confined tunnel was deafening. Under the constant bombardment the creature was forced back by the impact of the shells. With clumping steps it staggered into the mouth of the tunnel as it tried to keep its balance.

Then Creed could hear nothing but the sound he had been dreading: the click, click, click of empty barrels. Flinging his guns aside, the Bounty Hunter dove for

the detonator where Beckerman had dropped it. The cyborg roared and stomped up the tunnel. With one final twist of a screw, the connection was made; with the flick of a switch, the detonator primed. Hurling himself to the ground, Creed thumbed the lit red button then scrambled backwards up the tunnel as fast as he could propel himself.

With a distant rumbling boom, the last explosives set by Beckerman detonated. At the echoing sound, the advancing monstrosity turned, confused. The rumble became a roar as the charges set along the tunnel triggered one another in quick succession. A great cloud of dust and stone shards erupted from the tunnel mouth. Face down on the dusty ground, hands flung over his crumpled hat, the Bounty Hunter waited for the stony hurricane to devour him. Scant metres behind his prostrate form, a hundred tonnes of rubble crashed down on top of the cyborg and Beckerman's mangled corpse alike.

Rocks and rubble rattled about the prone Bounty Hunter, but the fatal crush of the avalanche on his back never came. As the rumbling din and shaking subsided and finally ceased, Creed thought that perhaps he could hear the whirr of grinding servos for a moment. Maybe it was just the buzzing from his tortured ear drums. Then there was silence.

Coughing, he staggered upright and looked around him. The Bounty Hunter was covered in a fine grey dust which choked his mouth and clogged his nostrils. He was standing at the tunnel mouth, where it led into another, smaller cave. Through the settling dust he could see a hefty iron door that had been left slightly ajar at the other end of the chamber. Daylight crept around the door frame, piercing the dust. Cautiously entering the cave, Creed hauled on the rusted door, which opened with surprising ease. Stepping through, he found himself surveying the crated contents of Beckerman's warehouse.

Limping towards the door, Creed winced at the pain from what felt like a hundred bruises. Nevertheless he grinned, a white slash of teeth in his black grimed face.

'Puzzle solved,' he said to himself. 'Guess I'm about done.'



THERE'S A WHOLE warehouse full of the stuff,' Creed explained, pointing at the chrome sphere in the open crate at the old Chief's feet.

'It shall be treasured and given due reverence,' the Ratskin said solemnly. He dropping the bag of oblong, ceramite chips into Creed's hand with a sigh. 'I knew there had to be a way.'

Creed said nothing.

'I feel that perhaps I have betrayed my people,' Chief Thunderslag continued, looking around him. 'Many young braves have died. Such a pointless waste of life.' He shrugged sadly. 'But the spirits had to be appeased; our families had been killed. At least now the spirits are at rest once more.' The old Ratskin turned to face Creed. 'What do you think? Have I betrayed my tribe?'

'I'm not much of a thinking man,' the Bounty Hunter replied.

'Does it not trouble you to accept what is no better than blood money?' Thunderslag asked him, a suggestion of anger in his voice.

Creed took the stub of a cheroot from between his lips and squinted again at the totem pole and the grotesque image carved upon it. He saw it now: a creature with one great claw and an ugly, fanged square face.

'A job's a job, old man,' he said, turning his gaze on the old Ratskin chief. Creed's expressionless features were an inscrutable mask, giving no clue as to his true feelings on the subject. 'See you round, old timer.'

With that, Nathan Creed secreted the money in a deep recess of his long, trailing coat. Pushing his battered hat firmly down over his brow, he turned and strode off into the fading light of the dimming globes. ●

Suspected Xeno-Infestation of Metaform Helus Hive



NAME: Metaform Helus Hive
LOCATION: Euphrata Plateau
PLANET: Holbrent IV [RRW-070.D04.80M.Ste]
CLUSTER: Stellar
SEGMENTUM: Pacificus

UTILITATUM ADMINISTRATUM SOLUM
 INSCRIPTOR: Manichus
 ILLUMINATOR: Doran
 SCHOLA EDIATRICA: Cassiltus
 EDO PURIFICATUM: Tigur
 EDO DIABOLUS: Fra Lemnos
 EXEMPLARIS: 1102
 TABULA LIBRARIA: RG233417.12.75.12/IP55

PRIMARY FUNCTIONALITY: Petro-chemical refinement

RECLAMATION DATE: 8022176.M40

POLITICAL STRUCTURE: Feudal Tithe system

RULING FAMILY: Clan Porackt

- **INDEX: RG233417.12.75.12/IP55**

• INVESTIGATION COMMENCEMENT:

++Day 1++

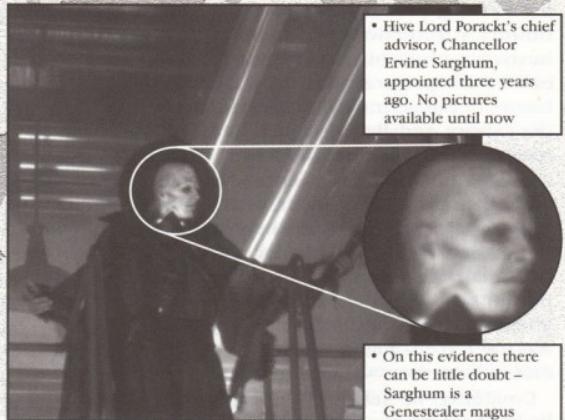
Holbrent IV merchant guild lodge produces official report noting a marked decline in output of petro-chemical products. In footnote, mention made of several unusual confrontational encounters with Hive Lord Garlen Porackt and his senior staff, including new appointee, Ervine Sarghum.

++Day 136++

Adeptus Administratum records substantial decline in productivity and all contact with the indigenous merchant guild is lost.

++Day 227++

Subcarrier signals from Holbrent IV's navigational beacons are analysed by Blood Angels Strike Cruiser



Sanguis Blade. They are found to contain encrypted distress signals of an unspecified nature. Under Inquisitorial commission, the *Sanguis Blade* is immediately dispatched to Holbrent IV.

++Day 242++

Sanguis Blade arrives at Holbrent IV. The Eighth Company of the Blood Angels Space Marines, under the command of Captain Menelus Arcite, disembark at Pollis Delphi

Hive. Those indigenous hive defence forces found to be untainted are also rallied by Captain Arcite. Inquisitor Raythys Kern is dispatched to Holbrent IV to obtain immediate confirmation of xeno-infestation levels.

++Day 291++

Signals are received from the Blood Angels Strike Cruiser in geo-stationary orbit over Holbrent IV, reporting that full scale assaults are underway



upon the perimeters of the Gamma quadrant of the Metaform Helus Hive.

All communication with the *Sanguis Blade* is abruptly cut off. Powerful super-orbital assault is strongly suspected. Priority Black emergency communications are received from Inquisitor Kern.



• Hive Lord Garlen Porackt

Transcription follows:

... Inquisitor Kern ...
Metaform ... consumed.
Shock troops have taken
severe casualties. Lord
Porackt is to be considered
of ... beyond ... nature.
Alpha, Beta ... solute
devastation. Civilian
casualties are extreme.
Xeno-infestation ...
secondary hives across the
planet. Captain Arcite ...
assault on Porackt's
private appart ... little
hope ... recommend
extreme of all action.

[Transmission ends.]

• CURRENT STATUS:

++Day 302++

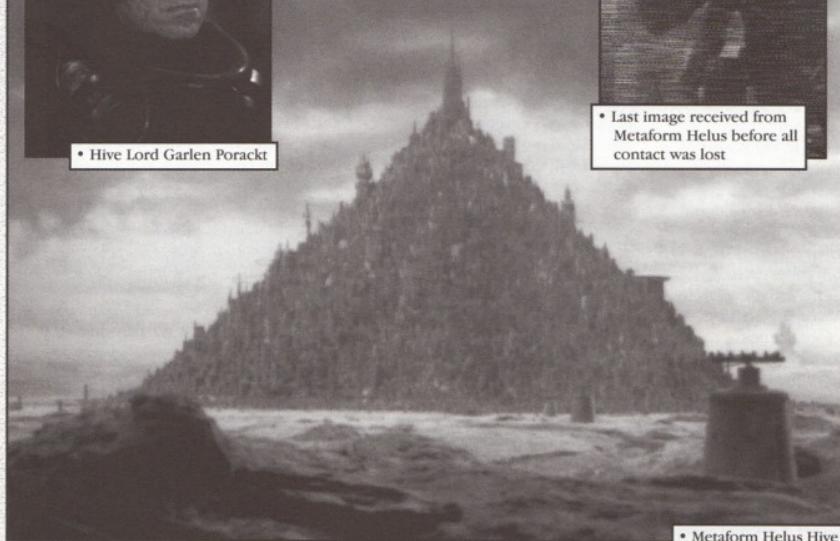
Inquisitor Krieger currently enroute to Holbrent IV aboard the Strike Cruiser *Felius Mortus*.

Awaiting final resolution.

[Report ends.]



• Last image received from Metaform Helus before all contact was lost



• Metaform Helus Hive



• ROLL OF HONOUR •

HERE ARE JUST A FEW OF THE WORTHY HEROES WHO CONTRIBUTED TO THIS ISSUE OF INFERNO!

DAN

ABNETT wants to thank a childhood schoolmate called Philip who, at the age of eight, gave him a stack of unwanted comics and thus propelled Dan down a steep incline into a life as a script writer. Dan has been working in the comics trade for about a decade now, and past credits embrace everything from the Punisher to Rupert Bear by way of Batman, Conan and Mr Men. Present credits include Star Trek, Resurrection Man, Lords of Misrule and Sinister Dexter. Thanks, Philip!

MARK

GIBBONS left art school after a fortnight painting with custard and gravy, and joined a rock band – not, perhaps, the wisest of decisions considering his choice of career. Hailing from wild and woolly Wales (just down the road from Tom Jones, actually), he cut his artistic teeth in TV and advertising before Games Workshop lured him into what he fondly calls his 'spiky period'.

Mark came over 'all Celtic' recently, when *2000 AD* commissioned a number of Sláine portraits from him.



He's obsessed with large, impractical motorcycles which worries his Granny terribly. Finally, Mark wants you all to know that he rather fancies Samantha Janus (just in case she has a brother who reads this sort of thing).

KEV

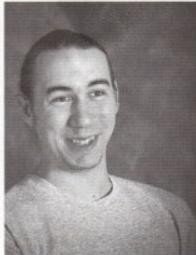
HOPGOOD started working in comics in 1984, drawing for Marvel UK, *2000 AD*



and a three-year stint on Iron Man for Marvel US. In 1995 he made the switch to the computer games industry, starting off at Mindscape where he worked on *Warhammer II: Dark Omen*. He currently works for Psygnosis in north London. However, his roots are in south London, where he lives with his partner, Heather, and their son, Louis. Louis is too young to play wargames yet, but his father is building him up a formidable collection of 'reference material', so that when the time is right he is ready and able to strike for the Emperor.

GAV

THORPE's writing career had an illustrious start when he had to resit his English Language GCSE twice. From then on he has learned a lot more about the world and how to write about it (mainly through trial and error). He says his favourite authors are JRR Tolkien, David Gemmel, HP Lovecraft, Terry Pratchett and Roger Hargreaves. He is currently working as a



Games Developer for Games Workshop and like all writers vows he will have a full novel published one day...

JOHN

WIGLEY had a humble start in the Games Workshop empire, working behind the counter in the Coventry branch. After several years of sending in samples, he was finally allowed to ascend to the hallowed halls of the Games Workshop Design Studio as a full-time artist. It was a dream come true. John loves all aspects of the GW hobby, and fields a large Empire army for Warhammer games, and a Space Wolves and Imperial Guard army for Warhammer 40,000. (*Ob, and be's a brilliant illustrator too! – Ed.*)

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INFERNO!

Gilead's Wake by Dan Abnett

'Fithvael, his axe sweeping, cut through the belly of a mailed swordsman and was first into the tunnel to Gilead's cell. As the fighting raged behind him, he pulled the ring of keys off a nail and slammed open the cage door. He eased Gilead down from the chains and wrapped a cloak about him. "We have him! He lives!"'

The Emperor's Grace by Alex Hammond

'Opening his eyes again, Streck looked up and traced the jittering death spasm of his assailant. The Eldar lay on the end of a large, crude chainsword. Engraved words following the blade read 'Catachan IV'. Lieutenant Lownes, dour face slick with the heat, looked down at the Commissar. "It would appear you're surrounded..."'

The Faithful Servant by Gav Thorpe

'Markus was confused; the stranger's words were baffling his pain-numbed mind. "Just who are you, foul-spawned deviant?"

'The warrior laughed again, slapping his hands on his knees. "I am called Estebar. My followers know me as the Master of Slaughter. And I have come for your soul..."'

Bad Spirits by Jonathan Green

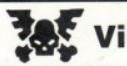
'Outside the Last Gasp Saloon, Nathan Creed examined the scrap of parchment. If the map was genuine, then it would appear that Toxic Sump's dome was built directly on top of another, much older settlement. Who knew what ancient treasures lay buried beneath the ash? Creed took the cheroot from his mouth and spat into the dust. The prospector had known. Now he was dead.'

Also featuring...

The astonishing 'Single Combat' from Kev Hopgood, Eldar versus crazed Dreadnought in a fight to the finish; an amazing look inside the Leman Russ 'Demolisher' courtesy of Logan Lubera; Ralph Horsley's journal of a 'Tomb Raider'; more 'Obvious Tactics' from Dave Pugh; and superlative illustrations from Mark Gibbons, John Wigley, Jeff Waye and Percy Melbye.

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